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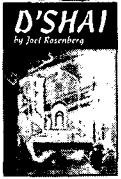
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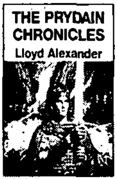
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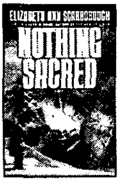
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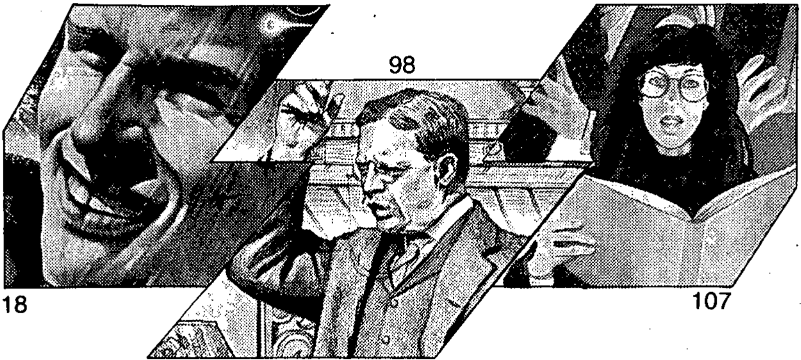

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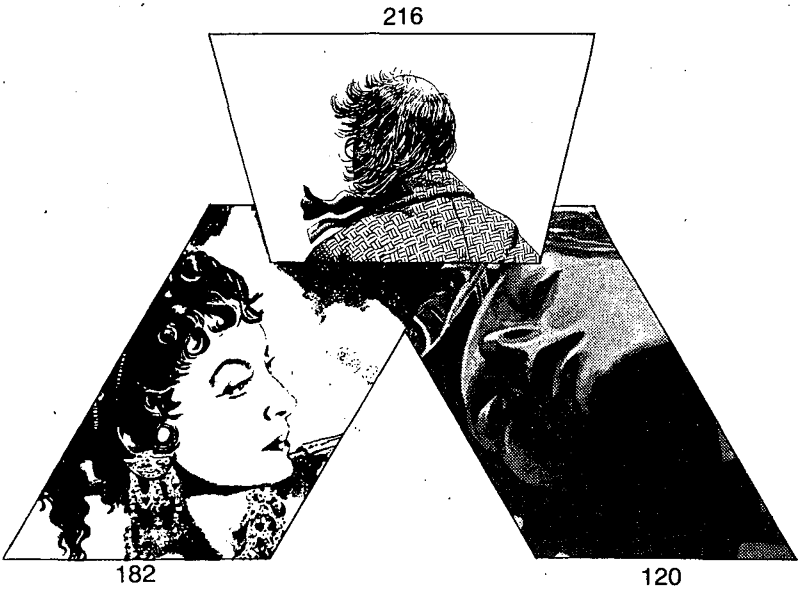

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Stories from IAsfm have won fourteen Hugos and seventeen Nebula awards, and our editors have received six Hugo awards for Best Editor. *IAsfm* was also the 1991 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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Published every 28 days which includes special issues in April and November by Davis Publications, Inc. at $2.50 per copy ($3.25 per copy in Canada). One year subscription $34.95 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $40.50, (GST included in Canada) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, P.O. Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. For back issues send $3.50 to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, NY, NY 10168-0035. Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine® is the registered trademark of Davis Publications, Inc. © 1991 by Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10168-0035. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian third class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Box 7058, Red Oak, Iowa 51566. In Canada return to 1801 South Cameron, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3E1. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R12393128

EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

THE DISMAL SCIENCE

In 1849, Thomas Carlyle referred to economics as "the dismal science," and so I have always found it. I cannot understand it, and I cannot believe that anyone else understands it, either. People may say they understand it and economists even win Nobel Prizes, but I think it's all a fake.

For instance, in a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, the tale is told of a bet made by two economists. One said that the cost of certain key metals would rise over the next ten years, because he felt that rising population and the declining availability of resources would make that necessary. The other said that the cost would decline over the next ten years because of advancing technology and because the higher the population the better-off the world would be.

Naturally, I was all on the side of the pessimist and judge my surprise when it turned out he had lost the bet; that the prices of the metals had indeed fallen; that grain was cheaper; that oil (allowing for inflation) was cheaper; and so on.

I was thunderstruck. Was it possible, I thought, that something that seems so obvious to me—that a steadily rising population is deadly—can be wrong?

Yes, it could be. I am frequently wrong.

However, it occurred to me that inflation is a world-wide phenomenon and has been for a long, long time. Even in those nations where inflation is "under control," as in the United States of America, what we really mean is that prices are going up only 3 to 5 percent a year. If basic commodities are going down in price, what is it that's going up and drowning them out?

I don't understand this.

There are other things I don't understand.

Right now, it is clear that what the American public does not want and will not endure is higher taxes. They will vote down any attempt to raise taxes, if they have a chance, and they do everything but lynch legislators who suggest higher taxes.

On the other hand, another thing the American public does not want is to have their handouts taken away. They'll kill any legislator who will suggest a cut in social security (let alone wiping it out altogether) or a cut in medicare or a cut in pensions. Furthermore, the American public wants to fight crime and drugs by having more policemen and more prisons and longer prison sentences and so on.

Then, too, we can't really allow highways to deteriorate and bridges to break down and buildings to decay—at least not beyond a certain point. The "infrastructure," as we now call it, must be maintained. What's more we want clean air, and clean water, and clean soil, and no pollution.

Oh, yes, and we want the biggest, best, and most advanced army in the world so we can fight off the deadly threats from Grenada and Panama, to say nothing of the deeds of our erstwhile buddy-pal, Saddam Hussein.

All that costs money, lots of money. Where is the money to come from in a society that says firmly and screechingly, "No taxes"?

Easy. We borrow the money.

Once Ronald Reagan became president on a platform of getting government off the back of American business, he kept taxes from rising, and spent a trillion dollars on the armed forces. The trillion dollars was borrowed, with the result that the national debt has tripled during the course of the 1980s and is well beyond three trillion dollars now, while the annual deficit keeps going up, too, despite everything the government can do in cutting down on social services and regulatory activities.

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Does it matter whether we tax or borrow? After all, if we tax, we take the money out of American pockets and if we borrow, we don't. Isn't that simple?

Maybe. I don't understand these things. It does seem to me, though, that there is a difference.

If the American people are taxed by means of a progressive income tax, then rich people pay more money than poor people, while poor people very naturally get more services (because they need more) than rich people. There is thus a shift of money from the rich to the poor.

This may not seem fair to people who are well off (as I am, for instance). I could very well argue that I've worked hard all my life and made full use of my talents, so that starting from absolute zero, I have made myself a reasonably wealthy man. Why should I give away some of my money to a bunch of incapable ne'er-do-wells?

The answer is easy. They're not a bunch of incapable ne'er-do-wells. They may well have worked harder than I did, but lacked my talent or my luck. In the second place, by allowing money to slide from rich to poor, we set up a stabler and better society, from which the well-off benefit as well as the poor.

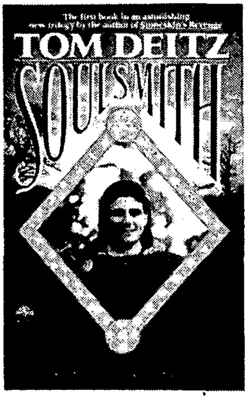
Suppose we borrow instead. The government decides not to take $100,000 of my hard-earned money. Instead it would prefer to have me buy $100,000 in government bonds. Fine! Anything the government taxes, they keep and I never see it again. But if I invest in bonds instead, the money is still mine and the government pays me interest for the use of it.

I'm much better off buying bonds than paying taxes, but the government isn't. Every year, it has to pay interest on the money it borrows and it is my understanding that the annual payment is well over 150 billion dollars now and still going up. And the government must pay it, for if it fails to do so that is called bankruptcy and everyone who has lent money to the government will try to get it back at once.

The result of borrowing, then, is that the government must pay money constantly to those people who can afford to buy bonds in quantity (usually tax-free bonds so that they don't have to contribute to the taxation with the money they make). In order to get the money to pay them, social services are pinched so that what it amounts to is the precise reverse of taxation—money flows from the poor to the rich.

Do I benefit from this? No, I don't, at least not in the long run, for the process destabilizes society and makes the world a more dangerous place in which to live, especially for those who are, if I may use the term, "lootable" by an aroused and impoverished people. I don't want to hang onto my money at the price of the guillotine.

Here's something else that per-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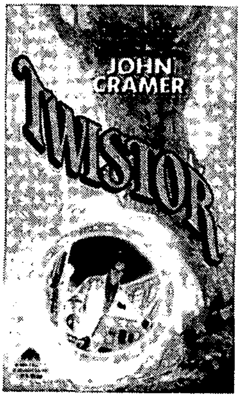

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haps I might understand if I knew anything at all about economics. We're "controlling" inflation. The inflation rate which had grown dangerously high under Carter, got much lower under Reagan. Why?

To me, the answer seems easy. We've encouraged the importation of goods from abroad. The foreign goods were manufactured by people who work for lower wages than Americans do, so the price is lower and inflation is decreased. The only bad thing about it is that it destroys American industries. I understand that American textiles and American shoes and American steel have sunk into the sub-basement. American automobiles can't compete with the Japanese. In fact, all our electronic industries can't compete.

About a year ago, I watched an item on the news in which it was pointed out that Japan was sending us advanced equipment and we were sending them chopsticks.

There is, of course, a constant drain as more money leaves the country for imports than comes back for exports. Perhaps if I understood economics then I would understand why this is a good way of fighting inflation.

As I said earlier, under Reagan we spent a trillion dollars on the armed forces. There are those who think that it was the unprecedented increase in our strength that forced the Soviet Union into virtual bankruptcy and put an end to its empire and to the Cold War. My own feeling is that the western world fought an economic war against the Soviet Union since it was first founded and that the Soviet Union finally collapsed as a result. The wonder is that it survived for three quarters of a century, fighting off not only an unrelenting economic war by the west but an enormous Nazi invasion. Someday when we are less driven by ideology, we may spare them a modest hand-clap for their stolid resistance.

But if the Soviet Union lost, that does not mean we won. We paid a price for the economic war, too. The trillion dollars we spent on the armed forces was money spent for purely useless purposes and it was a trillion dollars we couldn't spend on other things of far greater value. (Or say half a trillion for the armed forces and half a trillion for useful projects.)

The result is that here we are with a terrific army for which we have no real use. It's right there and we're so proud of it. Our schools are beneath contempt and, of all the industrial nations, our children are the most ignorant. Our drug culture is worse than it is anywhere else. We kill more people with guns in the hands of armed civilians than are killed in all the rest of the world put together. And so on and so on.

But look at our tanks and planes and helicopters. Who needs an educated and happy society while we have stealth bombers and can spend billions of dollars on a cockamamie hootenanny like "Star Wars"?

Mind you, it's not just spending money on the army. It is the general feeling that business and government go hand in hand; that once a government official deals with business, he joins that business when he retires from government.

Or once a regulator retires he joins the business he was suppose to be regulating. You can imagine how carefully such officials labor to keep business from cheating the people.

And, as a matter of fact, they don't. The 1980s were the decade of greed in which arms manufacturers, with virtual impunity, overcharged recklessly for underquality supplies, and the government looked the other way. A soldier who would refuse to charge into enemy machine guns would be promptly court-martialed and shot, but a businessman who sold inferior rivets to the army at a thousand percent markup, and endangered the lives of countless soldiers, gets a slap on the wrist.

What's more, under the Reagan administration, regulation became a dirty word. Business must not have the government on its back. An atmosphere was created that made it possible for savings and loans associations, for instance, to conduct their business recklessly and buy off government officials, or if they were too honest to take money, to get them fired.

It is fashionable to spread the blame for the S and L debacle over

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government generally, and five senators are loaded down with an ethics investigation. However, I'm a simple-minded fellow and I put the blame on the guy who was in charge.

Ronald Reagan set the fashion of buddy-buddying business and looking the other way, and no one else in government dared cross him because he was so popular. (You can get anywhere with the American people, if you have a goofy smile, dyed wavy hair, and are plainly stupid.)

In October 1987, when the stock market underwent a fainting spell, everyone started talking, "Deficit, deficit, deficit." We had to do something about the deficit. We didn't do a darn thing. The stock market recovered and the deficit is now far worse than it was in 1987 and so is the national debt.

Are we going to do anything?

What can we do?

The thing is that the world has gone through this before on several occasions. The example that is closest to our present situation is that of the Spain of Philip II in the 1500s.

Spain at that time had the finest army in Europe. It was unbeatable. It won every battle. What's more, Spain had the largest empire in the world. It controlled all of Latin America, large parts of the African and Asian coastlines. It had an endless supply of gold from Peru and Mexico.

However, Spain considered itself the policeman of Europe. It was the ideological champion of the world. It fought for Catholicism and was against Protestantism wherever it appeared. It was also against the Turks though not with quite the ardor with which it faced down Protestantism.

One must admire Philip II. He was no tyrant (except for his religious bigotry) and he was as hardworking as any king who ever lived. He was sincere in his beliefs and he bore up against disappointment. When he sent the "Invincible Armada" against England in 1588 and had it destroyed, he bowed to the will of God and did not blame the losing admiral, but treated him with sympathetic decency.

However, he set Spain tasks too great for itself. Spain, in its simple-minded concentration on ideological confrontation, allowed its economy to go to Hades, allowed its people to remain uneducated (lest they pick up dangerous and heretical notions), allowed its trade to dwindle.

Meanwhile, England, France, and the Netherlands, far weaker militarily, encouraged trade and built up their economies and by 1600 they were competing among themselves for world domination (England, later Great Britain, won out) while Spain by the time of Philip's death in 1598 had become a minor power and has remained one ever since.

Can you see the similarity? I can. The United States has become the ideological policeman of the world and has set itself tasks too great for itself. It has allowed its economy to go to Hades in its simple-minded pursuit of military power and it mistakes that military power for true strength.

Meanwhile, Germany and Japan, the two nations defeated catastrophically in World War II, are the true economic giants on Earth now. We have refused to allow them armed forces but have placed them under our umbrella and the price of our arrogance is that since 1945, they have grown steadily stronger, and we have grown steadily weaker.

In connection with the Gulf crisis, we see the United States, unable to cover its own expenses by raising taxes, having to hold out its tin can to Germany and Japan and beg for money. (We also want money from Saudi Arabia, but that at least is our own money which we gave them for oil supplies at a higher price than existed before the Gulf crisis.)

Again, Bush absolutely refuses to allow Congress to have any say in the development (if any) of the Gulf crisis. He is anxious to be strong and resolute and avoid any suggestion that he is a wimp, at whatever cost to the nation. However, Secretary of State Baker has gone from foreign nation to foreign nation, hat in hand, asking for support. We can't do it ourselves.

And meanwhile, at home, we're struggling with a recession. Do we have one? It is hard to get any economist to say that a recession exists because it would be unpatriotic to say so. Until 1907, we called business downturns "panics." That proved too harsh a word so in 1929, we called it a mere "depression." That word became too terrible so in 1937 when there was another fainting spell, we called it a "recession." Now "recession" is too hard. I suppose we will have to speak of a "dent."

What we can do is to count the unemployed and the impoverished according to an outmoded system that guarantees an undercount. That allows us to be patriotic by lying to ourselves.

We are, in short, in a bad way. As I write, Bush is in Latin America. He is selling the idea of democracy; but they are trying to sell the idea of debt relief. However, we can't give them debt relief. We need debt relief very badly ourselves.

When Lithuania was trying to break loose from the Soviet Union, Bush, like Bre'r Fox, laid low. If we loudly supported Lithuanian independence, Lithuania, once independent, would turn to us for financial support, and we can no longer manage that.

All this is economics and I don't understand the dismal science. Undoubtedly, there will be numerous letters from readers telling me that I'm all wrong and that the United States is in great shape. If so, I earnestly hope they are right, because I don't like what I see, and it would be nice if I were wrong.

But I don't think so. ●

LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

As a faithful subscriber to this magazine, I am compelled to say that the quality of stories and articles (especially yours), are exceptional by any standards of literature, not just in the SF genre. Keep it up!

I always enjoy reading the featured letters to you, but it seems that in trying to be fair in relation to the volume of letters received about one subject, it can become repetitious. I am specifically referring to the April 1991 issue wherein virtually all of the letters printed referred to Harlan Ellison's article on the woes of being famous. (If he thinks he has problems, what about Jodie Foster? As far as I know, no one has tried to shoot the president just to get Mr. Ellison's attention!)

It is logical that most of the letters in this forum should be directly concerned with comments regarding previously published stories and articles from this magazine, but we might all welcome a bit more diversity of subjects, in any given month.

I, for one, look up to you as one of the few who can render complex ideas into simple understandable terms; some of your books have changed the way I look at the world. Books such as *Beginnings* (I have purchased three copies already), *Realm of Numbers, Fact and Fantasy,* and *As Far As the Eye Can See,* just to name a few.

There are others who have given me new ways to look at "what is," notably: Steven Hawking's, *A Brief History of Time,* Dr. Richard Muller's, *Nemesis,* James Gleick's *Chaos* and *The Universe and Dr. Einstein* by Richard Barnett. Each of them gave me one book; you, on the other hand, have given me many.

I would like to close with a question that has never been answered to my satisfaction. I truly hope you can briefly address this.

In Einstein's famous equation $E = mc^2$, Energy equals mass times the speed of light squared. I do not understand how light speed can be a constant at 186,282 mps, and be squared if it cannot be exceeded? It seems to be a contradiction to me. Am I stupid? Or is this as hard as it looks, and I'm missing something?

Sincerely,

James L. Sartor
439 Ripley Ave.
Akron, OH 44312

We got a whole flood of letters on the Ellison piece, so we published a number of them.

As for squaring the speed of light, why not? Light goes at the maxi-

mum speed, but squaring it does not produce a speed. Light doesn't move at the square of the speed, the square is just a symbol in an equation.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I was less disturbed by Harlan Ellison's essay, "Xenogenesis" (August 1990), than by the treatment of the letters responding to it (April 1991).

Did the letters really run eight-to-one in Ellison's favor? Did no one suggest Ellison's own misconduct might inspire emulation among his fans? (Note, for example, the material in his essay about posing as a police officer to obtain an unlisted number.)

Did you let Ellison pick the letters!?

Yours disappointedly,

Taras Wolansky
Jersey City, NJ

Ellison did not pick the letters we printed on his essay, "Xenogenesis." We did, and we did our best to pick a fair sampling. Don't be so suspicious.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I read with interest Tudor Lewis' letter about that butchered screen supposition (I don't suppose it deserves the term "adaptation") of "Nightfall."

This is partly because the most recent time I read "Nightfall", it occurred to me that except when they went down to barricade the door to prevent the rioters from getting into the observatory, the whole story took place in one room. This in turn means that it could be adapted into a one-act play suitable for schools and such.

Perhaps you should do an "authorized" adaptation and allow organizations like schools to use it. This would have the added benefit of helping to "convince English teachers that science fiction has 'worth,'" as young Lewis complained.

It would be a pleasure for me to get involved with the community theater wherever I settle down after I get my doctorate, and perform in it.

All the best (I don't think I have to say, "and keep writing," for I am sure you will).

Sincerely,

Ian Chai
Overland Park, KS

"Nightfall" has been novelized with the help of Bob Silverberg, and I think that that's all that needs to be done for it.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I'd like to start off by saying that you are the greatest. I have all six of your Foundation books and am anxiously awaiting *Forward the Foundation*. The name makes me think it is going to take place right after *Prelude to Foundation*. I also have all four of the Robot Series. I also have *Nemesis, The Gods Themselves*, and *The End of Eternity*. I am waiting for *Nightfall* to come out in paperback before I get it. I also have volume 1 of *The Complete Stories*. I am even doing a research paper on you right now. I am using your autobiography for it and I am waiting for the third installment of it to be released.

But I am not writing you to tell you the books that I have. At the end of *Nemesis,* Bantam Spectra state that *The Gods Themselves* and *The End of Eternity* are being reprinted. Those are the editions that I have, but I am wondering if the Galactic Empire series is going to be reprinted. I have searched everywhere and can't find anything except *The Prisoners of the Stars* and *The Far Ends of Time and Earth* in the library but I want them individually for my "Isaac Asimov Library." Could you tell me if they are going to be reprinted or if they are still available somewhere?

Your #1 Fan,

Andy Copp
Locust Grove, WA

As far as I know, Doubleday is planning to put out new uniformly-bound editions of all my novels. This is something publishers usually do when an author is safely dead, but I suppose they don't feel they have long to wait.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been a subscriber to your magazine since its inception and I have habitually read each issue cover to cover. Admittedly, I am not a fan of fantasy; nonetheless, I have enjoyed reading virtually everything that has been published in your magazine.

Not so with the "On Books" column published in the February 1991 issue. I bravely endured the first four pages of the column authored by Norman Spinard. Several times I was forced to refer to *Webster's* to make sure that I knew what Mr. Spinard was saying; in one instance, I even diagrammed one of his rather complex sentences because that was the only way I could figure out what Spinard was talking about. (Sister Mary Praexedes, my sixth grade teacher, would have been proud of me.)

In any event, once the author of the review spent four plus pages discussing "Latin American magic realism" and began to "review" the book which prompted that elaborate dissertation, *Cortez on Jupiter* by Ernest Hogan, Spinard never really said what the book was about. Now that I think about it, he never said what "Latin America magic realism" is, either. Admittedly, he did discuss its "surrealistic surface texture," the cultural matrices involved, and admit that it is retrospective yet creative.

I must further admit that Mr. Spinard did outline the plots of the remaining books reviewed, although he seemed truly disappointed that the novel about a "contemporary American Jew" (*Only Begotten Daughter* by James Morrow) "turns Latin American magic realism literally inside out." Quite honestly, I'm not surprised since, as Spinard noticed, Morrow used "tricks" developed "to create the literary illusion of verisimilitude." (Yup, I had to go to *Webster's* for that one, too. I learned it was sorta like "mimetic" truth.)

Anyway, the bottom line is this. I read and enjoy your book review column because of the many SF

STEPHEN KING

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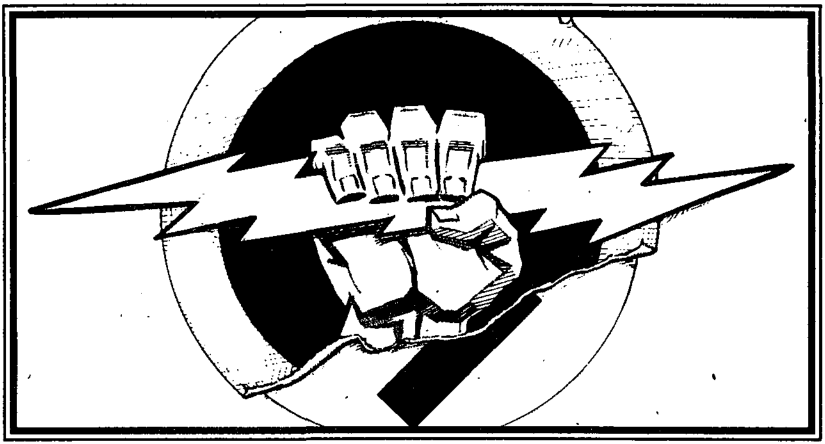

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books published, only a few are interesting to me. Normally, your book review column gives me a very good idea of which newly published or released books will appeal to me. Mr. Spinard's column was neither informative nor entertaining.

I felt much the same way about Spinard's column that he felt about the prose in *Cortez:* "Stuff like [mimetic, McLuhanistic, mysticalistic, and transmogrification] begins to seem forced, unnatural, like [a critic (?)] working with a dictionary and not quite making it." Now, I'm quite familiar with gobbledygook: I'm an attorney. I am daily subjected to and subject others to pages upon pages of legalisms, "buzzwords," and unnecessary verbiage. To paraphrase Justice Blackmun, I know wordy and unintelligible jargon when I see it.

Please delete the gobbledygook and bring back your quality book review columns.

Very truly yours,

Charles M. Sambol
Oroville, CA

Now, now, admittedly Spinrad has a large vocabulary and uses it, but it is possible that you yourself don't understand it as well as you might because you have a little difficulty in putting words together properly. For instance, Norman's name is "Spinrad." You've misspelled it eight times in your letter.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

Having just read the letters in the April issue of *IAsfm*, I feel —probably like many others—that I must add my two cents to the great debate over Harlan Ellison's essay.

Let me make a suggestion. I propose that Mr. Ellison write another thirty-five page essay (perhaps he should give it as a speech first) detailing all the wonderful things that 95 percent of his fans, and the fans of his colleagues, have said and done over the years. He could start with mentioning the fact that they have paid his bills. Once this has been done, I move that we forget the whole thing.

The fact is, I doubt very much that he has accomplished very much with his essay. Of the 95 percent of his readers who are polite, decent people he has probably disturbed and upset half of them and annoyed the rest of them. Of the 5 percent who are rude, crude, and possibly psychotic? He's probably elated them. Most of them now realize that they have accomplished what they set out to do—harass and infuriate famous authors to the point of making their lives miserable.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I enjoy your magazine immensely, and look forward to reading more controversial essays like Harlan Ellison's.

Very truly yours,

Victoria S. Walker
East Boston, MA

I disagree. Do you ever hear the people in charge speak about all the good kids who don't take drugs? No indeed. All the conversation is about the minority that use drugs. I'm afraid that's the way it is. A few bad apples spoil everything and it is those bad apples we speak of.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm*,

I have to congratulate you on a wonderful magazine. My husband and I had been avid fans of *Analog* for many years and were very excited when we bought our first copy of *IAsfm*, many, many, many moons ago. He still prefers *Analog*, being rather a techno-nut, but I have found myself more eagerly awaiting your publication. I have only one small bone of contention. The magazine's title clearly says "science fiction," my major passion since the age of five, and nowhere do I see the word "fantasy," a form of literature which never sat well with me due to its tendency to make writers lazy. I have to wonder, then, why I'm reading a fair amount of fantasy between its covers. And you aren't alone in that minor transgression. In the bookstores, I notice the same trend towards classifying some very obvious works of fantasy as SF. I do hope and pray it's merely a passing fad and that we will soon see a return to pure, unsullied SF. In the meantime, I shall enjoy your magazine, and will have to skip over the fantasy in much the same way I skip over the poems. I have nothing against the poems, I consider them quite a valid form of SF, unless of course I see the author struggling to find rhymes for wizard or dragon (lizard and wagon?) . . . I just don't happen to like poetry.

So I thank you for putting out such an exemplary magazine, and for giving us fans so many hours of enjoyment with each issue.

Sincerely,

S.F. Singer
Downsview, ONT
Canada

I, too, hope that fantasy is a passing fad, but we are rather stuck with it. The writers insist on writing fantasy. My own rather cynical thought is that writing good science fiction is a lot harder than writing fantasy and that may be what has made fantasy so popular in recent years.

—Isaac Asimov

EDITORS' NOTE:

We are proud to report that *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* placed third in *Magazine Week's* First Annual Noted & Quoted Dry T-Shirt Contest. First place was a tie between *Smithsonian* and *The New Yorker.* We still have a limited number of smalls and mediums available for $9.95.

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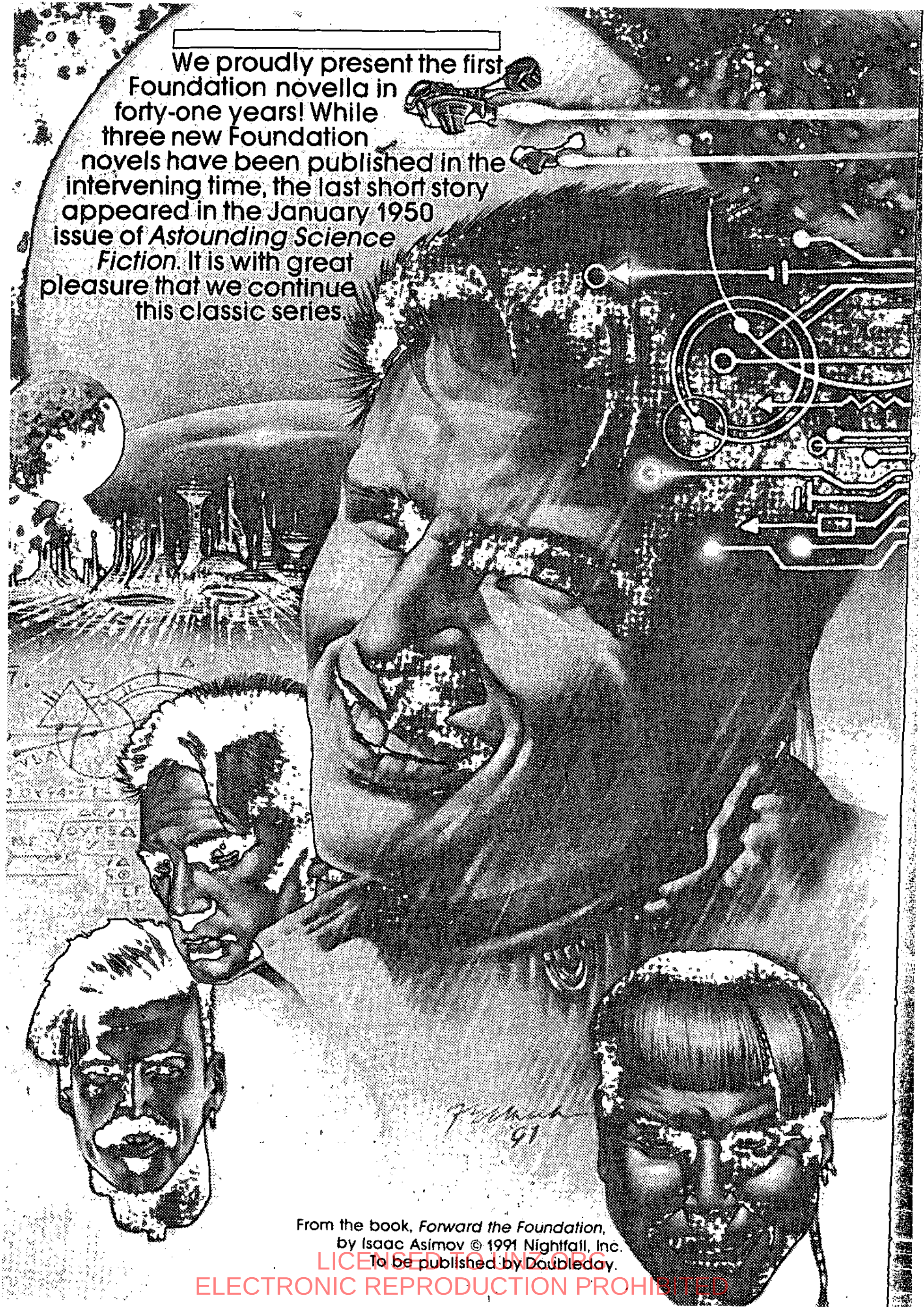
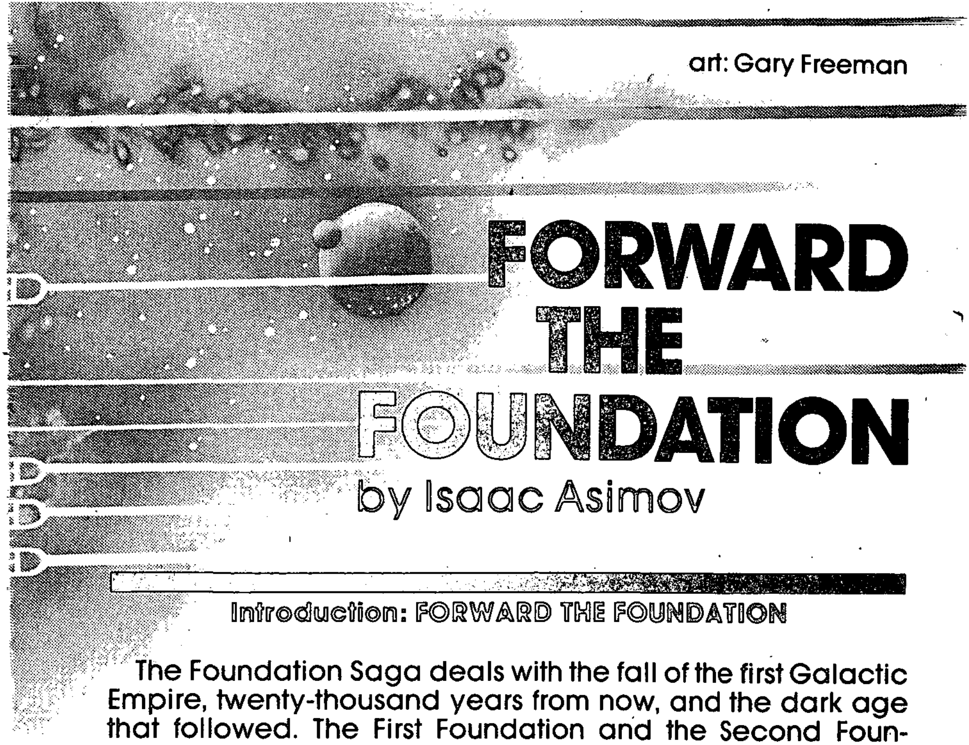


We proudly present the first Foundation novella in forty-one years! While three new Foundation novels have been published in the intervening time, the last short story appeared in the January 1950 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*. It is with great pleasure that we continue this classic series.

From the book, *Forward the Foundation*,
by Isaac Asimov © 1991 Nightfall, Inc.
To be published by Doubleday.



art: Gary Freeman

FORWARD THE FOUNDATION

by Isaac Asimov

Introduction: FORWARD THE FOUNDATION

The Foundation Saga deals with the fall of the first Galactic Empire, twenty-thousand years from now, and the dark age that followed. The First Foundation and the Second Foundation are struggling to ameliorate the hard times and to establish a Second (and better) Galactic Empire.

Their guidance in this is the science of psychohistory, devised by the great mathematician, Hari Seldon, which has the capacity to predict future trends in a statistical, if not absolute, sense.

The first three books of the saga: **Foundation, Foundation and Empire**, and **Second Foundation**, written in the 1940s, cover the first three centuries after the fall of the Galactic Empire. The next two books: **Foundation's Edge** and **Foundation and Earth**, written in the 1980s, cover the next two centuries.

The sixth book of the saga, **Prelude to Foundation,** returns to a period fifty years before the opening of **Foundation**, and investigates the youth of Hari Seldon and the beginnings of psychohistory.

In the seventh book, now being written, the fifty-year period between **Prelude to Foundation** and **Foundation** is taken up. Hari Seldon ages and psychohistory matures. What follows is Part I of the new book, **Forward the Foundation**. There will be four more parts (if I can manage it).

> DEMERZEL, ETO— . . . While there is no question that Demerzel was the real power in the government during much of the reign of the Emperor Cleon II, historians are divided as to the nature of his rule. The classic interpretation is that he was another in the long line of strong and ruthless oppressors in the last century of the undivided Galactic Empire, but there are revisionist views that have surfaced and that insist his was, if a despotism, a benevolent one. Much is made, in this view, of his relationship with Hari Seldon, though that remains forever uncertain, particularly during the bizarre episode of Laskin Joranum, whose meteoric rise—
>
> Encyclopedia Galactica*

"I tell you again, Hari," said Yugo Amaryl, "that your friend, Demerzel, is in deep trouble." He emphasized the word *friend* very lightly and with an unmistakable air of distaste.

Hari Seldon heard the distaste and ignored it. He looked up from his tri-computer and said, "I tell you again, Yugo, that that's nonsense." And then, with a trace of annoyance, just a trace, he added, "Why are you taking up my time by insisting?"

"Because I think it's important." Amaryl sat down defiantly. It was a gesture that indicated he was not going to be moved easily. Here he was and here he would stay.

Eight years before, he had been a heat-sinker in Dahl, as low on the social scale as it was possible to be. He had been lifted out of that position by Seldon, made into a mathematician and intellectual—more than that, into a psychohistorian.

Never for one minute did he forget what he had been and who he was now, and to what and to whom he owed the change. That meant that if he had to speak harshly to Hari Seldon—for Seldon's own good—no consideration of respect and love for the older man, no regard for his own career, would stop him. He owed such harshness, and much more, to Seldon.

"Look, Hari," he said, chopping at the air with this left hand, "for some reason that passes my understanding, you think highly of this Demerzel, but I don't. No one whose opinion I respect, except you, thinks well of him. I don't care what happens to him personally, Hari, but as long as I think *you* do, I have no choice but to bring this to your attention."

Seldon smiled, as much at the other's earnestness as at what he considered to be the uselessness of his concern. He was fond of Yugo Amaryl, more than fond. Yugo was one of the four people he had encountered during that short period of his life when he was in flight across the face of the planet Trantor—Eto Demerzel, Dors Venabili, Yugo Amaryl, and

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Raich—four the like of whom he had not found since and didn't expect to.

In a particular and, in each case, different way, these four were indispensable to him—Yugo Amaryl, because of his quick understanding of the principles of psychohistory and his imaginative probings into new areas. It was comforting to know that if anything happened to Seldon himself before the mathematics of the field could be completely worked out—and how slowly it proceeded, and how mountainous the obstacles—there would at least remain one good mind that would continue the research.

He said, "I'm sorry, Yugo. I don't mean to show any impatience with you, or to be rejecting whatever it is you are anxious to make me understand. It's just this job of mine; it's this business of being a department head—"

Amaryl found it his turn to smile and he repressed a slight chuckle. "I'm sorry, Hari, and I shouldn't laugh, but you have no natural aptitude for the position."

"As well I know, but I'll have to learn. I have to seem to be doing something harmless and there is nothing, *nothing* more harmless than being the Head of the Department of Mathematics at Streeling University. I can fill my day with unimportant tasks, so that no one need know or ask about the course of our psychohistorical research, but the trouble is I *do* fill my day with unimportant tasks, and I have insufficient time to—" His eyes glanced about his office, at the material stored in computers to which only he and Amaryl had the key and which, even if anyone else stumbled upon it, had been carefully phrased in an invented symbology that no one else would understand.

Amaryl said, "Once you work your way into your duties, you'll begin to delegate and then you'll have more time."

"I hope so," said Seldon dubiously. "But, tell me, what is this about Eto Demerzel that you want to tell me."

"Simply that Eto Demerzel, our great Emperor's First Minister, is busily creating an insurrection."

Seldon frowned. "Why would he want to do that?"

"I didn't say he wants to. He's simply doing it, and he's being helped by some of his political enemies. That's all right with me, you understand. I think, that under ideal conditions, it would be a good thing to have him out of the Palace, off Trantor and beyond the Empire for that matter. But you think highly of him, as I've said, and so I'm warning you, because I suspect that you are not following the recent political course of events."

"There are more important things to do," said Seldon mildly.

"Like psychohistory. I agree. But how are we going to develop psychohistory with any hope of success if we remain ignorant of politics? I mean, present-day politics. Now, *now*, is the time when the present is turning into the future. We can't just study the past. We know what happened in the past. It's against the present and the near future that we can check our results."

"It seems to me," said Seldon, "that I have heard this argument before."

"And you'll hear it again. It doesn't seem to do me any good to explain this to you."

Seldon sighed, sat back in his chair, and regarded Amaryl with a smile. The younger man could be abrasive but he took psychohistory seriously, and that repaid all.

Amaryl still had the mark of his early years as a heat-sinker. He had the broad shoulders and the muscular build of one who had been used to hard physical labor. He had never allowed his body to turn flabby and that was a good thing, for it had given Seldon himself reason to do the same against the impulse to spend all his time at the desk. He did not have Amaryl's sheer physical strength, but he still had his own talents as a Twister—for all that he had just turned forty and could not keep it up forever.

He said, "This concern for Demerzel cannot be purely a matter of his being a friend of mine. You have some other motive. Tell me."

"There's no puzzle to that. As long as you're a friend of Demerzel, your position here at the University is secure and you can continue to work on psychohistorical research."

"There you are. So I have reason to be friends with him. It doesn't pass your understanding at all."

"You have an interest in *cultivating* him. That I understand. But as for friendship—that I don't understand. However—if Demerzel lost power, quite apart from the effect it might have on your position, then Cleon himself would be running the Empire and the rate of its decline would increase. Anarchy may then be upon us before we have worked out all the implications of psychohistory and made it possible for the science to save all humanity."

"I see. —But, you know, I honestly don't think that we're going to work out psychohistory in time to prevent the fall of the Empire."

"Even if we could not prevent the fall, we could cushion the effects, couldn't we?"

"Perhaps."

"There you are, then. The longer we have to work in peace the greater the chance we will have to prevent the fall, or, at least, ameliorate the effects. Since that is the case, working backward, it may be necessary to save Demerzel, whether we—or at least, I—like it or not."

"Yet you just said that you would like to see him out of the Palace and away from Trantor and beyond the Empire."

"Yes, under ideal conditions, I said. But we are not living under ideal conditions, and we need our First Minister, even if he is an instrument of repression and despotism."

"I see. But why do you think the Empire is so close to dissolution that the loss of a First Minister will bring it about?"

"Psychohistory."

"Are you using it for predictions? We haven't even gotten the framework in place. What predictions can you make?"

"There's intuition, Hari."

"There's *always* been intuition. We want something more, don't we? We want a mathematical treatment that will give us probabilities of specific future developments under this condition or that. If intuition suffices to guide us, we don't need psychohistory at all."

"It's not necessarily a matter of one or the other, Hari. I'm talking about both. The combination, which may be better than either—at least until psychohistory is perfected."

"If ever," said Seldon. "But tell me, where does this danger to Demerzel arise? What is it that is likely to harm him or overthrow him? Are we talking overthrow?"

"Yes," said Amaryl, grimly.

"Then tell me. Have pity on my ignorance."

Amaryl flushed. "You're being condescending, Hari. Surely, you've heard of Jojo Joranum."

"Certainly. He's a demagogue— Wait, what's his sector? Nishaya, right? A very unimportant sector. Goat-herding, I think. High-quality cheeses."

"You have it. Not just a demagogue, however. He commands a strong following, and it's getting stronger. He aims, he says, for social justice and greater political involvement by the people."

"Yes," said Seldon. "I've heard that much. His slogan is 'Government belongs to the people.' "

"Not quite, Hari. He says 'Government *is* the people.' "

Seldon nodded. "Well, you know, I rather sympathize with the thought."

"So do I. I'm all for it—if Joranum meant it. But he doesn't, except as a stepping stone. It's a path, not a goal. He wants to get rid of Demerzel. After that, it will be easy to manipulate Emperor Cleon. After that, Joranum will take the throne himself and *he* will be the people. You know very well there have been a number of episodes of this sort in Imperial history, and these days the Empire is weaker and less stable than it used to be. A blow which, in earlier centuries, merely staggered it, might now shatter it. It will welter in civil war and never recover and we won't have psychohistory in place to teach us what must be done."

"Yes, I see your point, but surely it's not going to be that easy to get rid of Demerzel."

"You don't know how strong Joranum is growing."

"It doesn't matter how strong he's growing." A shadow of thought seemed to pass over Seldon's brow. "I wonder that his parents came to name him Jojo. There's something juvenile about it."

"His parents had nothing to do with it. His real name is Laskin, a very common name in Nishaya. He chose Jojo himself, presumably from the first syllable of his last name."

"The more fool, he, wouldn't you say?"

"No, I wouldn't. They shout it: Jo—jo—jo—jo, over and over. It's hypnotic."

"Well," said Seldon, making a move to return to his tri-computer and adjust the multidimensional simulation it had created, "we'll see what happens."

"Can you be that casual about it? I tell you the danger is imminent."

"No, it isn't," said Seldon, his voice suddenly hardening. "You don't have all the facts."

"What facts don't I have?"

"We'll discuss that another time, Yugo. For now, continue with your work and let me worry about Demerzel and the state of the Empire. Yes?"

Amaryl's lips tightened, but the habit of obedience to Seldon was strong. "Yes, Hari."

But not overwhelmingly strong. He turned at the door and said, "You're making a mistake, Hari."

Seldon smiled slightly. "I don't think so, but I have heard your warning and I will not forget. Still, all will be well."

And as Amaryl left, Seldon's smile faded. —Would, indeed, all be well?

2.

But Seldon, while he did not forget Amaryl's warning, did not think of it with any great degree of concentration. His fortieth birthday came and went, with the usual psychological blow.

Forty! He was not young any longer. Life no longer stretched before him as a vast uncharted field, its horizon lost in the distance. He had been on Trantor for eight years, and the time had passed quickly. Another eight years and he would be nearly fifty. Old age would be looming.

And he had not even made a decent beginning in psychohistory. Yugo Amaryl spoke brightly of laws, and worked out his equations by making daring assumptions based on intuition. How could one possibly test those assumptions? Psychohistory was not an experimental science, or at least the proper experiments would take worlds of people, centuries of time, and would involve a total lack of ethical responsibility.

It was an impossible problem, and he resented having to spend any time whatever on departmental problems, so he walked home at the end of the day in a morose mood.

Ordinarily, he could always count on the campus to rouse his spirits. It was high-domed and it gave the feeling of being out in the open without the necessity of enduring the kind of weather he had experienced on his one (and only) visit to the Imperial Palace. There were trees, lawns, walks, almost as though he were on the campus of his home college in Helicon.

The illusion of cloudiness had been arranged for the day with the Sunlight (no Sun, of course, just Sunlight) appearing and disappearing at odd intervals. And it was a little cool, just a little.

It seemed to Seldon that the cool days came a little more frequently

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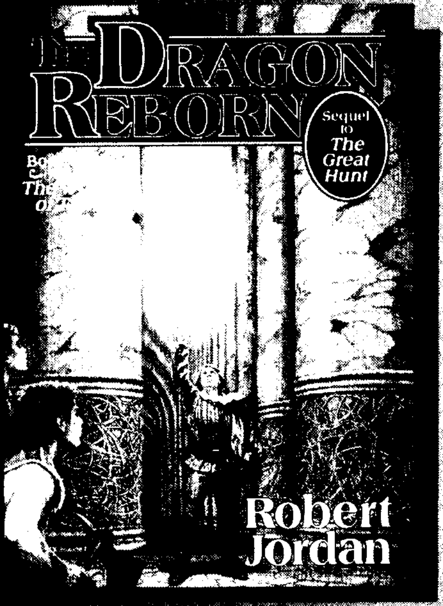

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than they used to. Was Trantor saving energy? Was it increasing inefficiency? Or (and he scowled inwardly as he thought it) was he getting old and was his blood getting thin? He placed his hands in his jacket pockets and hunched up his shoulders.

Usually, he did not bother guiding himself consciously. His body knew the way perfectly from his offices to his computer-room and from there to his apartment and back. Generally, he negotiated the path with his thoughts elsewhere, but this time a sound penetrated his consciousness. A sound without meaning.

"Jo—jo—jo—jo—"

It was rather soft and distant but it brought back a memory. Yes, Amaryl's warning. The demagogue. Was he here on campus?

His legs swerved without his making a conscious decision and brought him over the low rise to the Field, which doubled for calisthenics, sports, and student oratory.

There was a crowd of moderate size there and it seemed enthusiastic. On a platform was someone he didn't recognize, someone with a loud voice and a swaying rhythm.

It wasn't this man, Joranum, however. He had seen Joranum on holovision a number of times, and since Amaryl's warning, Seldon had watched him closely. Joranum was large, and smiled with a kind of vicious camaraderie. He had thick, sandy hair and light blue eyes.

The speaker was small, if anything, thin, wide-mouthed, dark-haired and loud. Seldon wasn't listening to the words, though he did hear the phrase "—power from the one to the many—" and the many-headed shout in response.

Fine, thought Seldon, but how does he intend to bring that about, and is he serious?

He was at the outskirts of the crowd now and looked about for someone he knew. There was Finangelos, a pre-math undergraduate. Not a bad young man, dark and woolly-haired.

"Finangelos," he called out.

"Professor Seldon," said Finangelos, after a moment of staring as though unable to recognize Seldon without a keyboard at his fingertips. He trotted over. "Did you come to listen to this guy?"

"I didn't come for any purpose but to find out what the noise was. Who is he?"

"His name is Namarti, Professor. He's speaking for Jojo."

"I hear *that*," said Seldon, as he listened to the chant again. It began each time the speaker made a telling point, apparently. "But who is this Namarti? I don't recognize the name. What school is he in? What's his department?"

"He's not a member of the school, Professor. He's one of Jojo's men."

"If he's not a member of the University, he has no right to speak here without a permit. Does he have one, do you suppose?"

"I wouldn't know, Professor."

"Well, then, let's find out."

Seldon started into the crowd but Finangelos caught his sleeve. "Don't start anything, Professor. He's got goons with him."

There were six young men behind the speaker, spaced rather widely, legs apart, arms folded, scowling.

"Goons?"

"For rough stuff, in case anyone tries anything funny."

"Then he's certainly not a member of the University and even a permit wouldn't cover what you call his goons. —You, Finangelos, signal through to the Campus police. They should have been here by now without a signal."

"I guess they don't want trouble," muttered Finangelos. "Please, Professor, don't try anything. If you want me to get the CP's, I will, but you just wait till they come."

"Maybe I can break this up before they come."

He began pushing his way through. It wasn't difficult. Some of those present recognized him, and all could see the professorial shoulder patch. He reached the platform, placed his hands on it, and vaulted up the three feet with a small grunt. He thought, with chagrin, that he could have done it with one hand ten years before, and not have grunted either.

He straightened up. The speaker had stopped talking and was looking at him with wary and ice-hard eyes.

Seldon said, calmly, "Your permit to address the students, sir?"

"Who are you?" said the speaker. He said it loudly, his voice carrying.

"I'm a member of the faculty of this University," said Seldon, equally loudly. "Your permit, sir?"

"I deny your right to question me on the matter." The young men with the speaker had gathered closer.

"If you have none, I would advise you to leave the University grounds immediately."

"And if I don't?"

"Well, for one thing, the Campus police are on their way." He turned to the crowd. "Students," he called out, "we have the right of free speech and freedom of assembly on this campus, but it can be taken away from us if we allow outsiders, without permits, to make unauthorized—"

A heavy hand fell on his shoulder and he winced. He turned about and found it was one of the men Finangelos had referred to as "goons."

The man said, with a heavy accent whose provenance Seldon could not immediately identify, "You get away from here, *fast*."

"What good will that do?" said Seldon. "The Campus police will be here any minute."

"In that case," said the speaker, Namarti, with a feral grin, "there'll be a riot. That doesn't scare us."

"Of course, it wouldn't," said Sheldon, "you'd like it, but there won't be a riot. You'll all go quietly." He turned again to the students, and shrugged off the hand on his shoulder. "We'll see to that, won't we?"

Someone in the crowd shouted. "That's Professor Seldon. He's all right. Don't pound him."

Seldon sensed there was ambivalence in the crowd. There would be some, he knew, who would welcome a dust-up with the Campus police just on general principles. On the other hand, there had to be some who liked him personally and others who did not know him but who would not want to see violence offered a member of the faculty.

A woman's voice rang out. There were women in the crowd, too, Seldon had noticed. "Watch out, Professor," she cried.

Seldon sighed. He liked to think of himself as in shape. He had kept up his Heliconian exercises, and there wasn't an ounce of flab on him, but he was forty and these were large young men he faced.

He didn't know if he could do it, if his reflexes were quick enough, his muscles sturdy enough.

One goon was approaching him, overconfidently, of course. Not quickly, which gave Seldon a little of the time his aging body would need. The goon held out his arm confrontationally, which made it easier.

Seldon seized the arm, whirled, and bent, arm up, and then down (with a grunt—why did he have to grunt?) and the goon went flying through the air, propelled partly by his own momentum. He landed with a thump on the outer edge of the platform, shoulder dislocated.

There was a wild cry from the audience at what was to them a totally unexpected development. Instantly, an institutional pride erupted.

"Take them, prof," shouted a voice. Others took up the cry.

Seldon faced Namarti, smoothing back his hair and trying not to puff. With his foot, he shoved the fallen goon (groaning) off the platform.

"Anyone else?" he asked, pleasantly, "or will you leave quietly?"

He faced Namarti and his five henchmen and as they paused irresolutely, Seldon said, "I warn you. The crowd is on my side now. If you try to rush me, they'll take you apart. —Come at me one at a time."

He had raised his voice with the last sentence, and made small come-hither motions with his fingers. The crowd yelled its pleasure.

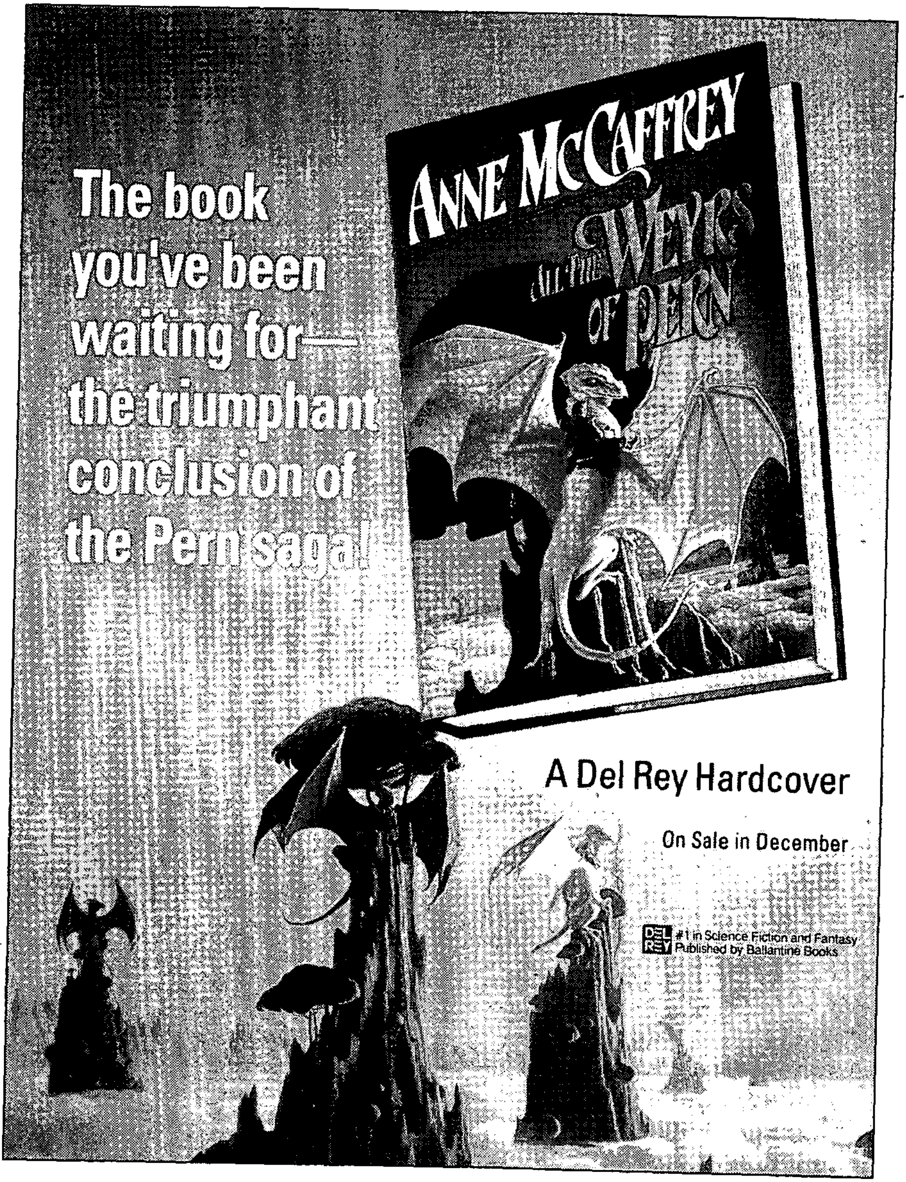
The speaker stood there stolidly. Seldon leaped past him and caught his neck in the crook of his arm. Students were climbing on to the platform now, shouting, "One at a time. One at a time," and getting between the bodyguards and Seldon.

Seldon increased the pressure on the other's windpipe and whispered in his ear, "There's a way to do this, Namarti, and I know how. I've practiced it for years. If you make a move and try to break away, I'll ruin your larynx so that you'll never talk above a whisper again. If you value your voice, do as I say. When I let up, you tell your bunch of bullies to leave. If you say anything else, they're the last words you'll say normally. And if you ever come back to this campus, I will no longer be Mr. Gentle. I'll kill you."

He released the pressure momentarily. Namarti said huskily, "All of you. Get out." They retreated rapidly, helping their stricken comrade.

When the Campus police arrived a few moments later, Seldon said, "Sorry, gentlemen, it was something in the nature of a false alarm."

He left the Field and resumed his walk home with more than a little



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chagrin. He had revealed a side of himself he did not want to reveal. He was Hari Seldon, mathematician, not Hari Seldon, sadistic Twister.

Besides, he thought gloomily, Dors would hear of this. In fact, he'd better tell her himself lest she hear it worse than it was.

And she would not be pleased.

3.

She wasn't.

She was waiting at the door of their apartment when he returned; with an easy stance, hand on one hip, looking very much as she had when he had first met her at this very University eight years before. Slim, well-built, reddish-gold hair, very beautiful in his eyes, but not very beautiful in any objective sense—though he had never been able to approach her objectively after the first few days of their friendship.

Dors Venabili! That's what he thought when he saw her calm face. There were many worlds, even many sectors on Trantor where it would have been common to call her Dors Seldon, but that, he always thought, would put the mark of ownership on her, and he did not wish it even though the custom was sanctioned by existence back into the vague mists of the pre-Imperial past.

Dors said softly and with a sad shake of her head that didn't disturb the curls of hair that covered her scalp neatly, "I've heard, Hari. What am I going to do with you?"

"A kiss would not be amiss."

"Well, perhaps, but only after we probe this a little. Come in." The door closed behind them. "You know, dear, I have my course and my research. I'm still doing that dreadful history of the Kingdom of Trantor, which you tell me is essential to your own work. Shall I drop it all and take to wandering about with you, protecting you? It's still my job, you know. It's more than ever my job now that you're making progress on psychohistory."

"Making progress? I wish I were. But you needn't protect me."

"Needn't I? I sent Raich out looking for you. After all, you were late and I was concerned. You usually tell me when you're going to be late. I'm sorry if that makes me sound as though I'm your keeper, Hari, but I *am* your keeper."

"Does it occur to you, Keeper Dors, that every once in a while, I like to slip my leash?"

"And if something happens to you, what do I tell Demerzel?"

"Am I too late for dinner? Have we clicked for kitchen service?"

"No. I was waiting for you. And as long as you're here, you click it. You're a great deal pickier than I am when it comes to food. And don't change the subject."

"Didn't Raich report and tell you I was all right? And since that is so, what's there to talk about?"

"When he found you, you were in control of the situation and he beat you back to me, but not by much. I have no details. Tell me— What —were—you—doing?"

Seldon shrugged. "There was an illegal gathering, Dors, and I broke it up. See here. The University could have gotten a good deal of trouble it didn't need if I hadn't."

"And it was up to you to prevent it? Hari, you're not a Twister anymore. You're an—"

He put in hastily, "An old man?"

"For a Twister, yes. You're forty. How do you feel?"

"Well— A little stiff."

"I can well imagine. And one of these days, when you try to pretend you're a young Heliconian athlete, you'll break a rib. —Now tell me about it."

"I did tell you. Amaryl warned me that Demerzel was in trouble because of the demagoguery of Joranum. I told you that."

"Jo-jo. Yes, I know that much. What *don't* I know? What happened today?"

"There was a rally in the Field. A Jo-jo partisan, named Namarti, was addressing the crowd—"

"Namarti is Gambol Deen Namarti, Joranum's right-hand man."

"Well, you know more about it than I do. In any case, he was addressing a large crowd and he had no permit and I think he was hoping there would be some sort of disturbance or riot. They feed on these disorders, and if he could close down the University even temporarily, he would charge Demerzel with the destruction of academic freedom. I gather they blame him for everything. So I stopped them. —Sent them off without a riot."

"You sound proud."

"Why not? Not bad for a man of forty."

"Is that why you did it? To test your status at forty?"

Thoughtfully, Seldon clicked the dinner menu. Then he said, "No. I really was concerned that the University would get into needless trouble. And I was concerned about Demerzel. I'm afraid that Yugo's tales of danger had impressed me more than I realized. That was stupid, Dors, because I know that Demerzel can take care of himself. I couldn't explain that to Yugo, or to anyone but you."

He drew in a deep breath. "It's amazing what a pleasure it is that I can at least talk to you about it. You know and I know and Demerzel knows and no one else knows—at least that I know of—that Demerzel is untouchable."

The dinner began to arrive—there was never any long delay at this time of evening—and Seldon accepted it quite casually. He had long since grown accustomed to the social position that made it unnecessary for them to patronize the community diners.

Seldon savored the seasonings they had learned to like during their stay at Mycogen—the only thing about that strange, male-dominated, religion-permeated, living-in-the-past Sector they had not detested.

Dors said softly, "How do you mean, 'untouchable'?"

"Come, dear, he can alter emotions. You haven't forgotten that. If Joranum really became dangerous, he could be," he made a vague gesture with his hands, "altered; made to change his mind."

Dors looked uncomfortable and the meal proceeded in an unusual silence. It wasn't until it was over and the remains, dishes, cutlery, and all, swirled down the disposal chute (which then smoothly covered itself over) that she said, "I'm not sure I want to talk about this, Hari, but I can't let you be fooled by your own innocence."

"Innocence?" He frowned.

"Yes. We've never talked about this. I never thought it would come up, but Demerzel has shortcomings. He is not untouchable, he may be harmed, and Joranum is indeed a danger to him."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. You don't understand robots—certainly not one as complex as Demerzel. And I do."

4.

There was a short time of silence again, but only because thoughts are silent. Seldon's were tumultuous enough.

His life with Dors Venabili was a happy one but it was so at a cost, at a condition. The condition was all the more stringent in that it had been settled, not through discussion or agreement, but by a mutual unspoken understanding.

Seldon understood that he found in Dors everything he would have wanted in a wife. True, he had no children, but he had neither expected any, nor, to tell the truth, had greatly wanted any. He had Raich, who was as much a son of his emotionally as if he had inherited the entire Seldonian genome—perhaps more so.

It was therefore not proper for Seldon to hint at the fact that he had almost from the start—certainly from the day of the knife-fight in Billibotton—accepted Dors as a robot, one who was, like Demerzel himself, in all ways indistinguishable from a human being, unless one were to consider that she had all the virtues of humanity in greater than the usual amount.

He had watched her calmly eating her dinner. How could anyone eat like that and not be human? He knew of her other biological functions and they showed no signs of anything but humanity.

She had never in all their life together admitted outright that she was a robot. Nor had she ever denied it outright. It had gotten to the point where he no longer thought of it. He had started off in the beginning by telling her, as earnestly as he knew how, that it didn't matter. —And it didn't. He had never tried to decide whether she was one or not; had

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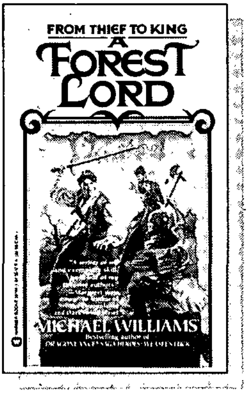

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looked for no evidence; had tried to find no proofs; had done his best to dismiss the matter from his mind.

But now she had said—what she had said. She had remarked on her own superior knowledge of robots and was that not an actual admission after eight years of silence?

The mere fact that she was causing him to think about the matter was breaking the agreement that had kept them in peace and comfort all these years, and he felt a faint, but growing, resentment at that.

"I said— Are you sulking, Hari?"

He started slightly, for there was the sound of repetition in her voice, and he realized he had been shrinking steadily deeper into his mind and away from her.

"I'm sorry, dear. I'm not sulking. —Not deliberately sulking. I'm just wondering how I ought to respond to your statement."

"About robots?" She seemed quite calm as she said the word.

"You said I don't know as much about them as you do. How do I respond to that?" He paused, then added quietly (knowing he was taking a chance), "That is, without offense."

"I didn't say you didn't *know* about robots. If you're going to quote me, do so with precision. I said you didn't *understand* about robots. I'm sure that you know a great deal, perhaps more than I do, but to know is not necessarily to understand."

"Now, Dors, you're deliberately speaking in paradoxes to be annoying. A paradox arises only out of an ambiguity that deceives either unwittingly or by design. I don't like that in science and I don't like it in casual conversation either, unless it is meant humorously, which I think is not the case, now."

Dors laughed in her particular way, softly, almost as though amusement were too precious to be shared in an over-liberal manner. "Apparently, the paradox has annoyed you into pomposity, and you are always humorous when you are pompous. However, I'll explain. It's not my intention to annoy you." She reached over to pat his hand, and it was to Seldon's surprise (and slight embarrassment) that he found that it had clenched itself into a fist.

Dors said, "You talk about psychohistory a great deal. To me, at any rate. You know that?"

Seldon cleared his throat. "I throw myself on your mercy as far as that's concerned. The project is secret, by its very nature. Psychohistory won't work unless the people it affects know nothing about it, so I can talk about it only to Yugo and to you. To Yugo, it is all intuition. He's brilliant, but he is so apt to leap wildly into darkness that I must play the role of caution, of forever pulling him back. But I have my wild thoughts, too, and it helps me to be able to hear them aloud, even" (and he smiled here), "when I have a pretty good notion you don't understand a word I'm saying."

"I know I'm a sounding board, and I don't mind. —I *really* don't mind, Hari, so don't begin making inner resolutions to change your behavior.

Naturally, I don't understand your mathematics. I'm just a historian, and not even a historian of science. The influence of economic change on political development is what is taking up my time now—"

"Yes, and I'm your sounding board on that, or hadn't you noticed? I'll need it for psychohistory when the time comes, so I suspect you'll be an indispensable help to me."

"Good! Now that we've settled why it is you stay with me—I knew it couldn't be for my ethereal beauty—let me go on to explain that occasionally, when your discussion veers away from the strictly mathematical, it seems to me I get your drift. You have on a number of occasions explained what you call the necessity of minimalism. I think I understand that. By it, you mean—"

"I know what I mean."

Dors looked hurt. "Less lofty, please, Hari. I'm not trying to explain it to you. I want to explain it to myself. You say you're my sounding board, so act like one. Turnabout is fair, isn't it?"

"Turnabout is fine, but if you're going to accuse me of loftiness when I say one little—"

"Enough! Shut up! —You have told me that minimalism is of the highest importance in applied psychohistory; in the art of attempting to change an undesired development into a desired one or, at any rate, a less undesired one. You have said that a change must be applied that is as minute, as minimal, as possible—"

"Yes," said Seldon, eagerly, "that is because—"

"*No*, Hari. *I'm* trying to explain. We both know that *you* understand it. You must have minimalism because every change, any change, has a myriad side-effects that can't always be allowed for. If the change is too great and the side-effects too many, then it becomes certain that the outcome will be far removed from anything you've planned, and that it would be entirely unpredictable."

"Right," said Seldon. "That's the essence of a chaotic effect. The problem is whether any change is small enough to make the consequence reasonably predictable, or whether human history is inevitably and unalterably chaotic in every respect. It was that which, at the start, made me think that psychohistory was not—"

"I know, but you're not letting me make my point. Whether any change would be small enough is not the issue. The point is that any change greater than the minimal *is* chaotic. The required minimum may be zero, but, if it is not zero, then it is still very small, and it would be a major problem to find some change that is small enough and yet is significantly greater than zero. Now that, I gather, is what you mean by the necessity of minimalism."

"More or less," said Seldon. "Of course, as always, the matter is expressed more compactly and more rigorously in the language of mathematics. See here—"

"Save me," said Dors. "Since you know this about psychohistory, Hari, you ought to know it about Demerzel, too. You have the knowledge, but not the understanding, because it apparently doesn't occur to you to apply the rules of psychohistory to the laws of robotics."

To which Seldon replied faintly, "Now I *don't* see what you're getting at."

"He requires minimality, too, doesn't he, Hari? By the First Law of Robotics, a robot can't harm a human being. That is the prime rule for the usual robot, but Demerzel is something quite unusual and for him, the Zeroth Law is a reality and it takes precedence even over the First law. The Zeroth law states that a robot can't harm humanity as a whole. But that puts Demerzel into the same bind you exist in when you labor at psychohistory. Do you see?"

"I'm beginning to."

"I hope so. If Demerzel has the ability to change minds, he has to do so without bringing about side-effects he does not wish, and since he is the Emperor's First Minister, the side-effects he must worry about are numerous indeed."

"And the application to the present case."

"Think about it! You can't tell anyone, except me, of course, that Demerzel is a robot, because he has adjusted you so that you can't. But how much adjustment did that take? Do you want to tell people that he is a robot? Do you want to ruin his effectiveness, when you depend on him for protection, for support of your grants, for influence quietly exerted on your behalf? Of course not. The change he had to make then was a very tiny one, just enough to keep you from blurting it out in a moment of excitement or carelessness. It is so small a change that there are no particular side-effects. That is how Demerzel tries to run the Empire generally."

"And the case of Joranum?"

"Is obviously completely different from yours. He is, for whatever motives, unalterably opposed to Demerzel. Undoubtedly, Demerzel could change that, but it would be at the price of introducing a considerable wrench in Joranum's makeup which would bring about results Demerzel could not predict. Rather than take the chance of harming Joranum, of producing side-effects that would harm others and, possibly, all of humanity, he must leave Joranum alone until he can find some small change, some *small* change that will save the situation without harm. That is why Yugo is right and why Demerzel is vulnerable."

Seldon had listened, but did not respond. He seemed lost in thought. Minutes passed before he said, "If Demerzel can do nothing in this matter, then I must."

"If he can do nothing, what can you do?"

"The case is different. I am not bound by the Laws of Robotics. I need not concern myself obsessively with minimalism. —And to begin with, I must see him."

Dors looked faintly anxious. "Must you? Surely it wouldn't be wise to advertise a connection between the two of you."

"We have reached a time where we can't make a fetish of pretending there is no connection. Naturally, I won't go to see him behind a flourish of trumpets and an announcement on the holo-vision, but I must see him."

5.

Seldon found himself raging at the passage of time. Eight years ago, when he had first arrived at Trantor, he could take instant action. He had only a hotel room and its contents to forsake and he could range across the sections of Trantor at will.

Now he found himself with department meetings, with decisions to make, with work to do. It was not so easy to dash off at will to see Demerzel, and if he could, Demerzel also had his time taken up. To find a pair of openings in time that fit was not easy.

Nor was it easy to have Dors shake her head at him. "I don't know what you intend to do, Hari."

And he answered impatiently, "I don't know what I intend to do, either, Dors. I hope to find out when I see Demerzel."

"Your first duty is to psychohistory. He'll tell you so."

"Perhaps. I'll find out."

And then just as he had fixed a time for the meeting at last, for eight days hence, he received a message on his department office wall screen in slightly archaic lettering. And to match that was the more than slightly archaic message, "I crave an audience with Professor Hari Seldon."

Seldon stared at it with astonishment. Even the Emperor was not addressed in quite that centuries-old turn of phrase.

Nor was the signature printed as it usually was for clarity. It was scripted with a flourish that left it perfectly legible and yet gave it the aura of a careless work of art dashed off by a master. The signature was "Laskin Joranum." —It was JoJo himself, craving an audience.

Seldon found himself chuckling. It was clear why the choice of words, and why the script. It made what was a simple request a device for stimulating curiosity. Seldon had no great desire to meet the man—or would have had none ordinarily. But what was worth the archaism and the artistry? He wanted to find out.

He and his secretary set the time of the appointment and the place. It would be in his office, certainly not in his home. A business conversation, nothing social.

And it would come before the projected meeting with Demerzel.

Dors said, "It's no surprise to me, Hari. You hurt two of his people, one of them his chief aide; you spoiled a little rally he was holding; and you made him, in the person of his representatives, seem foolish. He wants to take a look at you, and I think I had better be with you."

Seldon shook his head. "I'll take Raich. He knows all the tricks I know,

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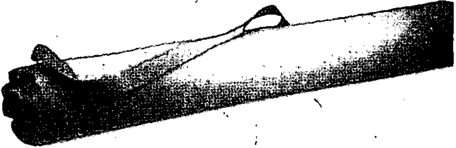

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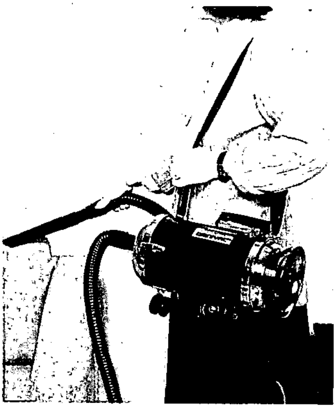

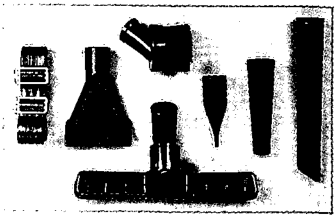

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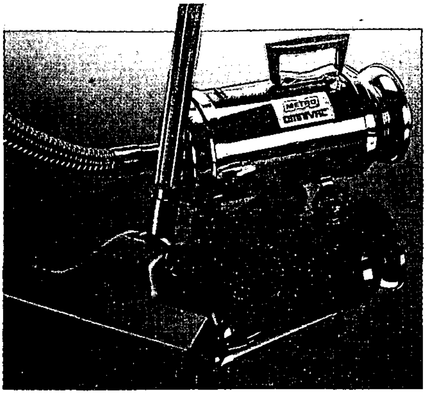

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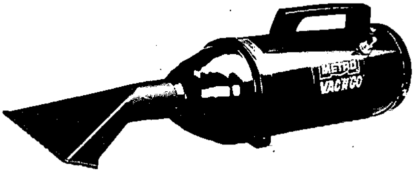

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and he's a strong and active twenty. I'm sure there'll be no need for protection."

"How can you be?"

"He's coming to see me on the University grounds. There will be any number of youngsters in the vicinity. I'm not exactly an unpopular figure with the student body, and I suspect that Joranum is the kind of man who does his homework and knows that I'll be safe on home territory. I'm sure that he will be perfectly polite—completely friendly."

"Hmph," said Dors, with a light twist of one corner of her lip.

"And quite deadly," Seldon finished.

6.

Hari Seldon kept his face expressionless, and bent his head just sufficiently to allow a reasonable courtesy. He had taken the trouble to look up a variety of holographs of Joranum, but, as is often the case, the real thing, unguarded, shifting constantly in response to changing conditions, is never quite the same as a holograph, however carefully prepared. Perhaps, thought Seldon, it is the response of the viewer to the "real thing" that makes it different.

Joranum was a tall man, as tall as Seldon at any rate, but larger in other directions. It was not the size of muscle, for he gave the impression of softness, without quite being fat. A rounded face, a thick head of hair that was sandy rather than yellow, light blue eyes. He wore a subdued coverall, and his face bore a half-smile that seemed to give the illusion of friendliness, while making it clear, somehow, that it was only an illusion.

"Professor Seldon," his voice was deep and under strict control, an orator's voice. "I am delighted to meet you. It is kind of you to permit this meeting. I trust you are not offended that I have brought a companion, one of my right-hand men, with me, although I have not cleared that with you in advance. He is Gambol Deen Namarti—three names you notice. I believe you have met him."

"Yes, I have. I remember the matter well." Seldon looked at Namarti with a touch of the sardonic. Namarti had been speaking in the University Field, and Seldon viewed him carefully now, under relaxed conditions. He was of moderate height, with a thin face, sallow complexion, dark hair, and wide mouth. He did not have a half-smile or any expression except one of cautious wariness.

"My friend, Dr. Namarti—his degree is in ancient literature—has come at his own request," said Joranum, his smile intensifying a hair, "to apologize."

He glanced quickly at Namarti, and Namarti, his lips tightening just at first, said in a colorless voice, "I am sorry, Professor, at what happened on the Field. I was not quite aware of the strict rules governing University rallies, and I was a little carried away by my own enthusiasm."

"Understandably so," said Joranum. "Nor was he entirely aware of your identity. I think we may now forget the little incident."

"I assure you, gentlemen," said Seldon, "that I have no great desire to remember it. This is my son, Raich Seldon, so you see I have a companion, too."

Raich had the mustache, black and abundant, that was the masculine mark of the Dahlite. He had had none when he first met Seldon eight years before, when he was a street-boy, ragged and hungry. He was short, but lithe and sinewy, and his expression was the haughty one he had adopted in order to add a spiritual few inches to his physical height.

"Good morning, young man," said Joranum.

"Good morning, sir," said Raich.

"Please sit down, gentlemen," said Seldon. "May I offer you something to eat or drink?"

Joranum held up his hands in polite refusal. "No, sir. This is not a social call." He seated himself in the place indicated. "Though I hope there will be many of that kind in the future."

"If this is to be about business, then, let's begin."

"The news reached me, Professor Seldon, of the little incident that you had so kindly agreed to forget, and I wondered why you took the chance of doing what you did. It was a risk, you will admit."

"I didn't think so, actually."

"But I did. So I took the liberty of finding out everything I could about you, Professor Seldon. You're an interesting man. From Helicon, I discovered."

"Yes, that's where I was born. The records are clear."

"And you've been here on Trantor for eight years."

"That is also a matter of public record."

"And you made yourself quite famous at the start by delivering a mathematical paper on—what do you call it?—psychohistory."

Seldon shook his head very slightly. How often he had regretted that indiscretion. Of course, he had no idea at the time that it was an indiscretion. He said, "A youthful enthusiasm. It came to nothing."

"Is that so?" Joranum looked about him with an air of pleased surprise. "Yet here you are, the head of the mathematics department at one of Trantor's greater universities, and only forty years old, I believe. —I'm forty-two, by the way, so I don't look upon you as very old at all. You must be a very competent mathematician to be in this position."

Seldon shrugged. "I wouldn't care to make a judgment in that matter."

"Or you must have powerful friends."

"We would all like to have powerful friends, Mr. Joranum, but I think you will find none in here. University professors rarely have powerful friends, or, I sometimes think, friends of any kind." He smiled.

And so did Joranum. "Wouldn't you consider the Emperor a powerful friend, Professor Seldon?"

"I certainly would, but what has that to do with me?"

"I am under the impression the Emperor is a friend of yours."

"I'm sure the records will show, Mr. Joranum, that I had an audience with his Imperial Majesty, eight years ago. It lasted perhaps an hour or less, and I saw no signs of any great friendliness in him at the time. Nor have I spoken to him since, or even seen him, except on holo-vision, of course."

"But, Professor, it is not necessary to see or speak to the Emperor to have him as a powerful friend. It is sufficient to see or speak to Eto Demerzel, the Emperor's First Minister. Demerzel is your protector and, since he is, we may as well say the Emperor is."

"Do you find First Minister Demerzel's supposed protection of me anywhere in the records; or anything at all in the records from which you can deduce that protection?"

"Why search the records when it is well-known there is a connection between the two of you? You know it and I know it. Let us take it then as given and continue. And please," he raised his hands, "do not take the trouble to give me any heart-felt denials. It wastes time."

"Actually," said Seldon, "I was going to ask why you should think that he would protect me. To what end?"

"Professor! Are you trying to hurt me by pretending to think I am a monster of naïvete? I mentioned your psychohistory, which Demerzel wants."

"And I told you that it was a youthful indiscretion that came to nothing."

"You may tell me a great many things, Professor. I am not compelled to accept what you tell me. Come, let me speak frankly. I have read your original paper and have tried to understand it with the help of some mathematicians on my staff. They tell me it is a wild dream and quite impossible—"

"I quite agree with them," said Seldon.

"But I have the feeling that Demerzel is waiting for it to be developed and put to use. And if he can wait, so can I. It would be more useful to you, Professor Seldon, to have me wait."

"Why so?"

"Because Demerzel will not endure in his position for much longer. Public opinion is turning against him steadily. It may be that when the Emperor wearies of an unpopular First Minister who threatens to drag the Throne down with him, he will find some replacement. It may even be my poor self whom the Emperor's fancy will seize upon. And you will still need a protector, someone who can see to it that you can work in peace and with ample funds for whatever you need in the way of equipment and assistants."

"And would you be that protector?"

"Of course, and for the same reason that Demerzel is. I want a successful psychohistoric technique so that I can rule the Empire more efficiently."

Seldon nodded thoughtfully, waited a moment, then said, "But in that case, Mr. Joranum, why must I concern myself in this? I am a poor

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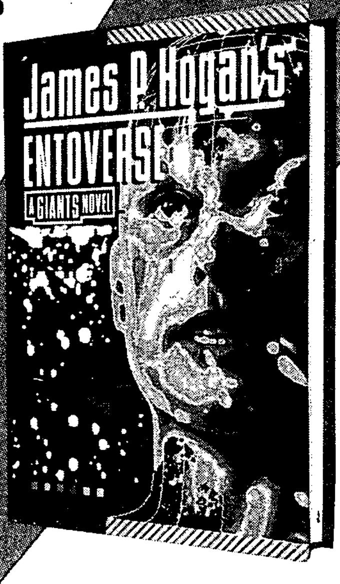
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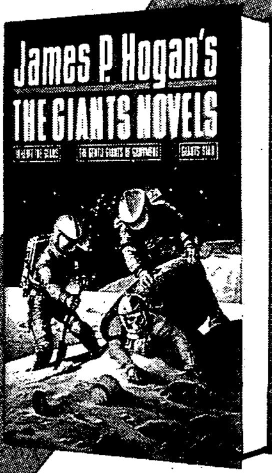
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scholar, living a quiet life, engaged in out-of-the-way mathematical and pedagogical activities. You say Demerzel is my present protector and you will be my future protector. I can go quietly about my business, then. You and the First Minister may fight it out. Whoever prevails, I have a protector still; or, at least, so you tell me."

Joranum's fixed smile seemed to fade a bit. Namarti, at his side, turned his dour face toward Joranum and made as though to say something, but Joranum's hand moved slightly and Namarti coughed and did not speak.

Joranum said, "Dr. Seldon. Are you a patriot?"

"Why, of course. The Empire has given humanity millennia of peace—mostly peace, at any rate—and fostered steady advancement."

"So it has, but at a slower pace in the last century or two."

Seldon shrugged. "I have not studied such matters."

"You don't have to. You know that politically, the last century or two has been a time of turmoil. Imperial reigns have been short, and sometimes have been shortened further by assassination—"

"Even mentioning that," put in Seldon, "is close to treason. I'd rather you didn't—"

"Well, there." Joranum threw himself back in his seat. "See how insecure you are. The Empire is decaying. I'm willing to say so openly. Those who follow me do so because they know only too well it is. We need someone at the Emperor's right hand who can control the Empire, subdue the rebellious impulses that seem to be arising everywhere, give the armed forces the natural leadership they should have, lead the economy—"

Seldon made an impatient stopping motion with his arm. "And you're the one to do it, are you?"

"I intend to be the one. It won't be an easy job and I doubt there would be many volunteers, for good reason. Certainly, Demerzel can't do it. Under him, the decline of the Empire is accelerating to a total breakdown."

"But you can stop it?"

"Yes, Dr. Seldon. With your help. With psychohistory."

"Perhaps Demerzel could stop the breakdown with psychohistory—if psychohistory existed."

Joranum said calmly, "It exists. Let us not pretend it does not. But its existence does not help Demerzel. Psychohistory is only a tool. It needs a brain to understand it and an arm to wield it."

"And you have that, I take it?"

"Yes. I know my own virtues. I want psychohistory."

Seldon shook his head. "You may want it all you please. I don't have it."

"You *do* have it. I will not argue the point." Joranum leaned closer as though wishing to insinuate his voice into Seldon's ear rather than allowing the sound-waves to carry it there. "You say you are a patriot. I must replace Demerzel to avoid Imperial destruction. However, the manner of replacement might itself weaken the Empire desperately. I do not wish that. *You* can advise me how to achieve the end smoothly, subtly, without harm or damage—for the sake of the Empire."

Seldon said, "I cannot. You accuse me of knowledge I do not possess. Though my every emotion was bent on helping you, I still could not."

Joranum stood up, suddenly. "Well, you know my mind, and what it is I want of you. Think about it. And I ask you to think about the Empire. You may feel you owe Demerzel—this ruiner of all the millions of planets of humanity—your friendship. Be careful. What you do may shake the very foundation of the Empire. I ask you to help me in the name of the quadrillions of human beings who fill the galaxy. Think of the Empire."

His voice had dropped to a thrilling and powerful half-whisper. Seldon felt himself almost trembling. "I will always think of the Empire," he said.

Joranum said, "Then that is all I ask right now. Thank you for consenting to see me."

Seldon watched him and his companion leave.

He frowned. Something was bothering him, and he was not sure what it was.

7.

Namarti's dark eyes remained fixed on Joranum as they sat in their carefully shielded office in the Streeling sector. It was not an elaborate headquarters; they were as yet weak in Streeling, but they would grow stronger.

Amazing how the movement was growing. It had started from nothing three years back and now its tentacles stretched—in some places more thickly than others, of course—throughout Trantor. The Outer Worlds were as yet largely untouched. Demerzel had labored mightily to keep them content, but that was his mistake. It was here in Trantor that rebellions were dangerous. Elsewhere, they could be controlled. Here, Demerzel could be toppled. Odd that he should not realize that, but Joranum had always held to the theory that Demerzel's reputation was overblown; that he would prove an empty shell if anyone dared oppose him; and that the Emperor would destroy him quickly if his own security seemed at stake.

So far, at least, all of Joranum's predictions had come to pass. He had never once failed to have his way except in minor matters, such as that recent rally at the University in which this Seldon fellow had interfered.

That might be why Joranum had insisted on the interview with him. Even a minor toe-stub must be taken care of. Joranum enjoyed the feeling of infallibility and Namarti had to admit that the vision of a constant string of successes was the surest way of insuring the continuation of success. People tended to avoid the humiliation of failure by joining the obviously winning side even against their own opinions.

But had the interview with this Seldon been a success, or was it a second stub of the toe to be added to the first? Namarti had not enjoyed having been brought along in order to be made to apologize humbly, and he didn't see that it had done any good.

Now Joranum sat there, silent, obviously lost in thought, gnawing at the edge of one thumb as though trying to draw some sort of mental nourishment from it.

"Jojo," said Namarti softly. He was one of the very few people who could address Joranum by the diminutive that the crowds shouted out endlessly in public. Joranum solicited the love of the mob in this way, among others, but he demanded respect from individuals in private, except for those special friends who had been with him from the start.

"Jojo," he said again.

Joranum looked up. "Yes, G.D., what is it?" He sounded a little testy.

"What are we do going to do about this Seldon fellow, Jojo?"

"Do? Nothing, right now. He may join us."

"Why wait? We can put pressure on him. We can pull a few strings at the University and make life miserable for him."

"No, no. So far Demerzel has been letting us go our way. The fool is overconfident. The last thing we want to do, though, is to push him into action before we are quite ready. And a heavy-handed move against Seldon may do it. I suspect Demerzel places enormous importance on Seldon."

"Because of this psychohistory you two talked about?"

"Indeed."

"What is it? I have never heard of it."

"Few people have. It's a mathematical way of analyzing human society that ends by predicting the future."

Namarti frowned and felt his body move slightly away from Joranum. Was this a joke of Joranum's? Was this intended to make him laugh? Namarti had never been able to work out when or why people expected him to laugh. He never had an urge to.

He said, "Predict the future? How?"

"Ah! If I knew that, what need would I have of Seldon?"

"Frankly, I don't believe it, Jojo. How can you foretell the future? It's fortune-telling."

"I know, but after this Seldon broke up your little rally, I had him looked into. All the way. Eight years ago, he came to Trantor and presented a paper on psychohistory at a convention of mathematicians, and then the whole thing died. It was never referred to again by anyone. Not even by Seldon."

"It sounds as though there were nothing to it, then."

"Oh, no, just the reverse. If it had faded slowly, if it had been subjected to ridicule, I would have said there was nothing to it. But to be cut off suddenly and completely means that the whole thing has been placed in the deepest of freezes. That is why Demerzel may have been doing nothing to stop us. Perhaps he is not being guided by a foolish overconfidence; perhaps he is being guided by psychohistory, which must be predicting

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something that Demerzel plans to take advantage of at the right time. If so, we might fail unless we can make use of psychohistory ourselves."

"Seldon claims it doesn't exist."

"Wouldn't you if you were he?"

"I still say we ought to put pressure on him."

"It would be useless, G.D. Didn't you ever hear the story of the Axe of Venn?"

"No."

"You would if you were from Nishaya. It's a famous folk tale back home. In brief, Venn was a woodcutter who had a magic axe that, with a single light blow, could chop down any tree. It was enormously valuable, but he never made any effort to hide it or preserve it—and yet it was never stolen, because no one could lift or swing the axe but Venn himself.

"Well, at the present moment, no one can handle psychohistory but Seldon himself. If he were on our side only because we had forced him, we could never be certain of his loyalty. Might he not urge a course of action that would seem to work in our favor but would be so subtly drawn that, after a while, we found ourselves, quite suddenly, destroyed? No, he must come to our side voluntarily, and labor for us because he wishes us to win."

"But how can we bring him about?"

"There's Seldon's son. Raich, I think he's called. Did you observe him?"

"Not particularly."

"G.D., G.D., you miss points if you don't observe everything. That young man listened to me with his heart in his eyes. He was impressed. I could tell. If there's one thing I can tell, it is just how I impress others. I know when I have shaken a mind, when I have edged someone toward conversion."

Joranum smiled. It was not the pseudo-warm ingratiating smile of his public appearance. It was a genuine smile this time, cold, somehow, and menacing.

"We'll see what we can do with Raich," he said, "and if, through him, we can reach Seldon."

8.

Raich looked at Hari Seldon after the two politicians had gone and fingered his mustache. It gave him satisfaction to stroke it. Here in the Imperial sector, some people wore mustaches, but they were usually thin, despicable things of uncertain color; thin, despicable things even if dark. Most did not wear them at all, but suffered with naked upper lips. Seldon didn't, for instance, and that was just as well. With his color of hair, a mustache would have been a travesty.

He watched Seldon closely, waiting for him to cease being lost in thought, and then found he could wait no longer.

"Dad!" he said.

Seldon looked up and said, "What?" He sounded a little annoyed at having his thoughts interrupted, Raich decided.

Raich said, "I don't think it was right for you to see those two guys."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Well, the thin guy, whatever his name is, was the guy you made trouble for that time. He can't have liked it."

"But he apologized."

"He didn't mean it. But the other guy, Joranum—he can be dangerous. What if they had weapons?"

"What? Here in the University? In my office? Of course not. This isn't Billibotton. Besides, if they had tried anything, I could have handled both of them together. Easily."

"I don't know, Dad," said Raich, dubiously, "you're getting—"

"Don't say it, you ungrateful monster," said Seldon, lifting an admonishing finger. "You'll sound just like your mother and I have enough of that from her. I am *not* getting old; or at least not *that* old. Besides, you were with me and you're almost as skilled a Twister as I am."

Raich's nose wrinkled. "Twisting ain't much good." (It was no use. Raich heard himself speak and knew that even eight years out of the morass of Dahl, he still found it easy to speak with the Dahlite accent that marked him firmly as a member of some lower class. And he was short, too, to the point where he sometimes felt stunted. —But he had his mustache, and no one ever patronized him twice.)

"Twisting ain't much good," he said, "unless you play by the rules and who says these guys will. I didn't expect to start Twisting if they tried anything."

Casually, he drew an innocent-looking curved rod, which, at a slight pressure, developed a long, sharp and slightly-curved blade.

"Raich!" said Seldon, shocked.

"Just playing it safe, Dad."

"Have I, or have I not, told you a hundred times that no weapons are allowed on campus."

"Sure, but what if *they* had weapons."

"Put it away, Raich. And one last time—you are *not* to break the rules. And don't tell your mother about it, either. She'd take it worse than I do."

"No, she wouldn't. If she were here, you bet she'd have one, too. She keeps talking about how she has to protect you."

"She doesn't have to. And neither do you. Put it away. —I'm seriously annoyed, Raich."

Raich put it away, but felt no contrition. In Dahl, a man without a knife might almost as well be without a mustache. He wasn't in the Dahl sector anymore, but he still felt the force of its customs. He had been brought up to them in the nomadic and street-wise pre-teen years of his life.

He said, "What are you going to do about Joranum?"

"For now, nothing."

"Well, look, Dad, I got some recordings of his talks out of the computer one time. —Everyone is talking about him so I thought I would listen to what he has to say. And, you know, he makes some kind of sense. I don't like him and I don't trust him but he *does* make some kind of sense. He wants all sectors to have equal rights and equal opportunities, and there ain't nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"Certainly not. All civilized people feel that way."

"So why don't we *have* that sort of stuff? Does the Emperor feel that way? Does Demerzel?"

"The Emperor and the First Minister have an entire Empire to worry about. They can't concentrate all their efforts on Trantor itself. It's easy for Joranum to talk equality. He has no responsibilities. If he were in the position to rule, he would find that his efforts would be greatly diluted by an Empire of 25 million planets. Not only that, but he would find himself stopped at every point by the Sectors themselves. Each one wants a great deal of equality for itself, but not much equality for others. Tell me, Raich, are you of the opinion that Joranum ought to have a chance to rule, to show what he can do?"

Raich shrugged. "I don't know. I wonder. —But if he had tried anything on you, I would have had my knife at his throat before he could move two centimeters."

"Your loyalty to me, then, exceeds your concern for the Empire."

"Sure. You're my Dad."

Seldon looked at Raich fondly, but behind that look he felt a trace of uncertainty. How far could Joranum's nearly-hypnotic influence go?

9.

Hari Seldon sat back in his chair, the vertical back giving as he did so and allowing him to assume a half-reclining position. His hands were behind his head and his eyes were unfocused. His breathing was very soft indeed.

Dors Venabili was at the other end of the room, with her viewer turned off and the microfilm back in place. She had been through a rather concentrated period of revision of her opinions on the Florina incident in early Trantorian history and she found it rather restful to withdraw for a few moments and to speculate on what it was that Seldon was considering.

It had to be psychohistory. It would probably take him the rest of his life, tracking down the byways of this semi-chaotic technique. And he would end with it incomplete, leaving the task to others (to Amaryl, if that young man had not also worn himself out on the matter) and breaking his heart at the need to do that.

Yet it gave him a reason for living. He would live longer with the

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problem filling him from end to end, and that pleased her. Someday she would lose him, she knew, and she found that the thought afflicted her. It had not seemed it would at the start, when her task had been the simple one of protecting him for the sake of what he knew.

When had it become a matter of personal need? How could there be so personal a need? What was there about the man that caused her to feel uneasy when he was not in her sight, even when she knew he was safe so that the deeply-ingrained orders within her were not called into action?

His safety was all that she had been ordered to be concerned with. How did the rest intrude itself?

She had asked it of Demerzel long before, when the feeling had made itself unmistakable.

He had regarded her gravely and said, "You are a complex mechanism, Dors, and there are no simple answers. In my life there have been several individuals whose presence made it easier for me to think, pleasanter to make my responses. I have tried to judge the ease of my responses in their presence and the unease of my responses in their final absence to see whether I was the net gainer or loser. In the process, one thing became plain. The pleasantness of their company outweighed the regret of their passing. On the whole, then, it is better to experience what you experience now, than not to."

She thought: Hari will some day leave a void, and each day that some day is closer, and I must not think of it. It hampers my responses.

It was to get rid of the thought that she finally interrupted him. "What are you thinking of, Hari?"

"What?" Seldon focused his eyes with an apparent effort.

"Psychohistory, I assume. I imagine you've traced another blind pathway."

"Well, now. That's not on my mind at all." He laughed suddenly. "Do you want to know what I'm thinking of ? —Hair!"

"Hair? Whose?"

"Right now, yours." He was looking at her fondly.

"Is there something wrong with it? Do you think it is time there was some gray showing?"

"Come! Who needs or wants gray in *your* hair. —But it's led me to other things. Nishaya, for instance."

"Nishaya? What's that?"

"It was never part of the pre-Imperial kingdom of Trantor, so I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it. It's a world, a small one. Isolated. Unimportant. Overlooked. I only know anything at all about it because I've taken the trouble to look it up. Very few worlds out of twenty-five million can really make much of a sustained splash, but I doubt that there's another one as insignificant as Nishaya. Which is very significant, you see."

Venabili shoved her reference material to one side and said, "What is this new penchant you have for paradox, which you always tell me you detest? What is this significance of insignificance?"

"Oh, I don't mind paradoxes when *I* perpetrate them. You see, Joranum comes from Nishaya."

"Ah, it's Joranum you're concerned with."

"Yes. I've been reading his speeches at Raich's insistence. They don't make very much sense, but I strongly suspect that when his voice is added the effect can be almost hypnotic. Raich is very impressed by him."

"I imagine that anyone of Dahlite origins would be, Hari. Joranum's constant call for Sector equality would naturally appeal to the downtrodden Heat-sinkers. You remember when we were in Dahl?"

"I remember it very well, and, of course, I don't blame the lad. It just bothers me that Joranum comes from Nishaya."

Venabili shrugged. "Well, Joranum has to come from somewhere and, conversely, Nishaya, like any other world, must send its people out at times, even to Trantor."

"Yes, but, as I've said, I've taken the trouble to investigate Nishaya. I've even managed to make hyperspatial contact with some minor official—which cost a considerable quantity of money which I cannot, in good conscience, charge to the department."

"And did you find anything which was worth the money?"

"I rather think so. You know Joranum is always telling little stories to make his points, stories that are current on his home planet of Nishaya. That serves a good purpose for him here on Trantor since it makes him appear to be a man of the people, and full of wise saws and home-spun philosophy. Those tales litter his speeches. They make him appear to be from a small world, to have been brought up on an isolated farm surrounded by an untamed ecology. People like it, especially Trantorians, who would rather die than be trapped somewhere in an untamed ecology, but who love to dream about one just the same."

"But what of it all?"

"The odd point is that not one of the stories was familiar to the person I spoke to on Nishaya."

"That's not significant, Hari. It may be a small world, but it's a world. What is current in Joranum's birth-section of the world may not be current in whatever place your official came from."

"No, no. Folk tales, in one form or another, are usually world wide. But aside from that. I had considerable trouble in understanding the fellow. He spoke Galactic Standard with a thick accent. I spoke to a few others in the world, just to check, and they all had the same accent."

"And what of that?"

"Joranum doesn't have it. He speaks a fairly good Trantorian. It's a lot better than mine. I have the Heliconian stress on the letter 'r.' He doesn't. According to the records, he arrived on Trantor when he was nineteen. It is just impossible, in my opinion, to spend the first nineteen years of your life speaking that barbarous Nishayan version of Galactic Standard and then come to Trantor and lose it. However long he's been here, some trace of the accent would have remained—look at Raich and his Dahlite way of speaking, and he left Dahl when he was only twelve."

"What do you deduce from all this?"

"What I deduce—what I've been sitting here all evening, deducing like a deduction machine—is that he didn't come from Nishaya. In fact, I think he picked Nishaya as the place to pretend to come from simply because it is so backwoodsy, so out-of-the-way, that no one would think of checking it. He must have made a thorough computer search to find the one world least likely to allow him to be caught in a lie."

"But that's ridiculous, Hari. Why should he want to pretend to be from a world he did not come from? It would mean a great deal of falsification of records."

"And that's precisely what he has probably done. He's probably got enough followers in the civil service to make that possible. Probably no one person has done much in the way of revision and all are too fanatical to talk about it."

"But still— Why?"

"Because I suspect he doesn't want people to know where he really comes from."

"Why not? All worlds in the Empire are equal both by laws and by custom."

"I don't know about that. These high-ideal theories are somehow never borne out in real life."

"Then where does he come from? Do you have any idea at all?"

"Yes. Which brings us back to this matter of hair."

"What about the hair?"

"I sat there with Joranum, staring at him and feeling uneasy without knowing why I was feeling uneasy. Then, finally, I realized that it was his hair that made me uneasy. There was something about it that reminded me—don't be angry, Dors—that reminded me of you."

"Of *me*?" Venabili said strenuously, frowning.

"There was a life to it, a gloss. I wouldn't have noticed it, were it not that I've been looking at your hair for eight years. No one else would notice."

"This is mad, Hari. I know what you think I am, even though you never quite come out and say so. Do you think then that Laskin Joranum is a—what you think I am? He can't be. He absolutely can't be. Demerzel would know. He's a completely human being."

"I know he's human. I've read his speeches, you see, and no— device—could say such things. Joranum is not bound by the Three Laws. Just the same, his hair is artificial and carefully grown on a scalp that ought to be innocent of such things."

"*Ought* to be?" Venabili's eyes narrowed. It was clear she suddenly understood. "Do you mean—"

"Yes, I do mean. He's from the past-centered, mythology-ridden Trantorian sector of Mycogen. That's what he's been laboring to hide."

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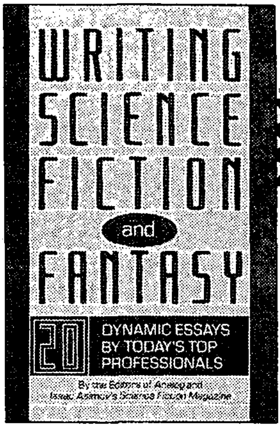

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10.

Dors Venabili thought coolly about the matter. It was her only mode of thought—cool. Not for her the hot flashes of emotion.

She closed her eyes to concentrate. It had been eight years since she and Hari had visited Mycogen and they hadn't been there long then. There had been little to admire there, but for the food.

The pictures arose. The harsh, puritanical, male-centered society; the emphasis on the past; the removal of all body hair, a matter deliberately imposed on themselves to make themselves different so that they would "know who they were"; their legends; their memories (or fancies) of a time when they ruled the Galaxy, when their lives were prolonged, when robots existed.

She opened her eyes and said, "Why, Hari?"

"Why what, dear?"

She said, "Why should he pretend not to be from Mycogen?"

She didn't think he would remember Mycogen in greater detail than she; in fact, she knew he wouldn't, but his mind was better than hers—different, certainly. Hers was a mind that only remembered and drew the obvious inferences in the fashion of a mathematic line of deduction. He had a mind that leaped unexpectedly. Seldon liked to pretend that intuition was solely the province of his assistant, Yugo Amaryl, but Venabili was not fooled by that. Seldon liked to pose as the unworldly mathematician who stared at the world out of perpetually wondering eyes, but she was not fooled by that, either.

"Why did he pretend not to be from Mycogen?" she repeated, as he sat there, his eyes lost in an inward look that Venabili always associated with his attempt to squeeze one more tiny drop of usefulness and validity out of the concepts of psychohistory.

Seldon said, finally, "It's a harsh society, a limiting society. There are always those who chafe over its manner of dictating every action and every thought. There are always those who find they cannot entirely be broken to the harness, who want the greater liberties available in the more secular world outside. It's understandable."

"And they then force the growth of artificial hair?"

"No, not generally. The average breakaway—that's what the Mycogenians call the deserters, and they despise them, of course—wears a wig. It's much simpler, but much less effective. Really serious Breakaways grow false hair, I'm told. The process is difficult and expensive but is almost unnoticeable. I've never come across it before though I've heard of it, and I might not have noticed it this time, if it hadn't—"

He hesitated and she said, matter-of-factly, "If it hadn't reminded you of my hair. How do you know all these things, Hari?"

"Dors, I must. I've spent years studying all eight hundred sectors of Trantor, trying to work out the basic rules and mathematics of psychohistory. I have little enough to show for it, unfortunately, but I have learned a few things."

"But why, then, do the Breakaways have to hide the fact that they're from Mycogen? They're not persecuted that I know of."

"No, they're not. In fact, there's no general impression that Mycogenians are inferior. It's worse than that. The Mycogenians aren't taken seriously. They're intelligent, everyone admits that, highly-educated, dignified, cultured, wizards with food, almost frightening in their capacity to keep their sector prosperous—but no one takes them seriously. Their beliefs strike people outside Mycogen as ridiculous, humorous, unbelievably foolish. And that view clings even to Mycogenians who are Breakaways. A Mycogenian attempt to seize power in the government would be crushed by laughter. Being feared is nothing. Being despised, even, can be lived with. But being laughed at—that's fatal. Joranum wants to be First Minister, so he must have hair and, to be comfortable, he must represent himself as having been brought up on some obscure world as far from Mycogen as he can possibly manage."

"Surely there are some people who are naturally bald."

"Never as completely depilated as Mycogenians force themselves to be. On the Outer Worlds, it wouldn't matter much. Mycogen is a distant whisper to any other world. The Mycogenians keep themselves so much to themselves that it is a rare one indeed who has ever left Trantor. Here on Trantor, though, it's different. People might be bald, but they usually have a fringe of hair that advertises them as non-Mycogenian—or they grow facial hair. Those very few who are completely hairless—usually a pathological condition—are out of luck. I imagine they have to go about with a doctor's certificate to prove they are not Mycogenians."

Dors, frowning slightly (impassivity was her natural state, but she understood well that to be too impassive was to fail in being human) said, "Does this help us any?"

"I'm not sure."

"Couldn't you let it be known that he is a Mycogenian?"

"I'm not sure that could be done easily. He must have covered his tracks well, and even if it could be done—"

"Yes?"

Seldon shrugged. "I don't want to invite an appeal to bigotry. The social situation on Trantor is bad enough without running the risk of loosing passions that neither I nor anyone else could then control. If I do have to resort to the matter of Mycogen, it will only be as a last resort."

"Then you want minimalism, too."

"Of course."

"Then what *will* you do?"

"I have the appointment with Demerzel, and it hasn't been canceled yet. He may know what to do."

Venabili looked at him sharply. "Hari, are you falling into the trap of expecting Demerzel to solve all problems for you?"

"No, but perhaps he'll solve this one."

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then I'll have to think of something else, won't I?"

"Like what?"

A look of pain crossed Seldon's face. "Dors, I don't know. Don't expect me to solve all problems, either."

11.

Eto Demerzel was not frequently seen. It was his policy to remain in the background, for a variety of reasons, one of which was that his appearance changed so little with time.

Hari Seldon had not seen him, except for occasional glimpses (as anyone on Trantor might now and then) over a period of some years and had not spoken to him truly in private since the old days of his early time on Trantor. Seeing Demerzel now brought back those days achingly. The mere fact that Demerzel still looked exactly as he did made the ache sharper. His face still had its strong regular features. He was still tall and well-built, with the same dark hair with the hint of blond. He was not pretty, but was gravely distinguished. He looked like someone's ideal picture of what an Imperial First Minister ought to look like, and not at all as any such official in history before his time ever had. It was his appearance, Seldon thought, that gave him half his power over the Emperor, and therefore over the Imperial Court, and therefore over the Empire. Demerzel advanced toward him, a gentle smile curving his lips without that in any way altering the gravity of his countenance, somehow.

"Hari," he said. "It is pleasant to see you. I was half-afraid you would change your mind and cancel."

"I was more than half-afraid *you* would, First Minister."

"Eto—if you fear using my real name."

"I couldn't. It won't come out of me. You know that."

"It will to me. Say it. I would rather like to hear it."

Seldon hesitated, as though he couldn't believe his lips could frame the words or his vocal cords sound them. "Daneel," he said, at length.

"R. Daneel Olivaw," said Demerzel. "Yes. You will dine with me, Hari. If I dine with you, I won't have to eat, which will be a relief."

"Gladly, though one-way eating is not my idea of a convivial time. Surely, a bite or two—"

"To please you—"

"Just the same," said Seldon, "I can't help but wonder if it is wise to spend too much time together."

"It is. Imperial orders. His Imperial Majesty wants me to."

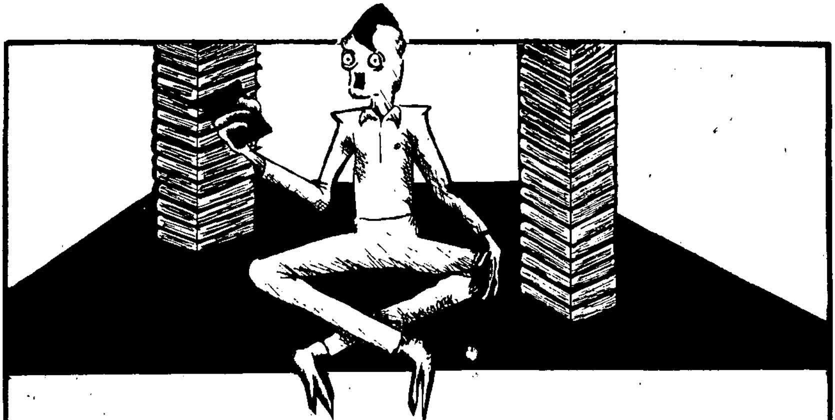
"Why, Daneel?"

"In two more years, the Decennial Mathematical Congress will be meeting again. —You look surprised. Have you forgotten?"

"Not really. I just haven't thought about it."

"Were you not going to attend? You were a hit at the last one."

"Yes. With my psychohistory. Some hit."



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"You attracted the attention of the Emperor. No other mathematician did."

"It was you who were initially attracted, not the Emperor. Then I had to run and stay out of the Imperial notice until such time as I could assure you that I had made a start on my psychohistorical research, after which you allowed me to remain in safe obscurity."

"Being the head of a prestigious mathematics department is scarcely obscurity."

"Yes, it is, since it hides my psychohistory."

"Ah, the food is arriving. For a while, let's talk about other things as befits friends. How is Dors?"

"Wonderful. A true wife. Hounds me to death with her worries over my safety."

"That is her job."

"So she reminds me, frequently. Seriously, Daneel, I can never be sufficiently grateful to you for bringing us together."

"Thank you, Hari, but, to be truthful, I did not foresee married happiness. Even had I thought it of you, I would not of Dors."

"Thank you for the gift just the same, however short of the actual consequences your expectations were."

"I'm delighted, but it is a gift, you will find, that may be of dubious further consequence, as is my friendship."

"Because you're robots?" said Seldon, but Demerzel did not answer that and merely made a gesture that Seldon was to fall to.

Which he did. After a while, he turned the morsel of fish on his fork and said, "I don't actually recognize the organism, but this is Mycogenian cooking."

"Yes, it is. The Emperor is fond of it, at least now and then. And I know you are."

"It's their excuse for existence. Their only excuse. But they have special meaning to you. I mustn't forget that."

"The special meaning has come to an end. Their ancestors, long, long ago, inhabited the planet of Aurora. They lived three hundred years and more and were the lords of fifty worlds of the Galaxy. It was an Auroran who first designed and produced me. I don't forget that; I remember it far more accurately, and with less distortion, than their Mycogenian descendants do. But then, long, long ago, I left them. I made my choice as to what the good of humanity must be and I have followed it, as best I could, all this time."

Seldon said, with sudden alarm, "Can we be overheard?"

Demerzel seemed amused. "If you have only thought of that now, it is far too late. But fear not, I have taken the necessary precautions. Nor have you been seen by too many eyes when you came. Nor will you be seen by too many when you leave. And those who do see you will not be surprised. I am well-known to be an amateur mathematician of great pretensions but of little ability. That is a source of amusement to those at the Court who are not entirely my friends, and it would not surprise anyone here that I should be concerned about laying the groundwork for the forthcoming Congress. It is about that that I wish to consult you."

"I don't know that I can help. There is only one thing I can talk about at the Congress, and I can't talk about it. If I attend at all, it will only be as part of the audience. I do not intend to present any papers."

"I understand. Still, if you would like to hear something curious, His Imperial Majesty remembers you."

"Because you have kept me in his mind, I suppose."

"No. I have not labored to do so. However, His Imperial Majesty occasionally surprises me. He is aware of the forthcoming Congress and he apparently remembers your talk at the earlier one. He remains interested in the matter of psychohistory and more may come of it, I must warn you. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he may ask to see you. The Court will surely consider it a great honor—for you to receive the Imperial call twice in a single lifetime."

"You're joking. What could be served by my seeing him?"

"In any case, if you are called to an audience, you can scarcely refuse. —How are your young protégés, Yugo and Raich?"

"Surely you know. I imagine you keep a close eye on me."

"Yes, I do. On your safety, but not on every aspect of your life. I am afraid my duties fill much of my time and I am not all-seeing."

"Doesn't Dors report?"

"She would in a crisis. Not otherwise. She is reluctant to play the role of spy in non-essentials." Again the small smile.

Seldon grunted. "My boys are doing well. Yugo is increasingly difficult to handle. He's more of a psychohistorian than I am and I think he feels I hold him back. As for Raich, he's a lovable rascal; always was. He won me over when he was a dreadful street-urchin and what's more surprising is that he won over Dors. I honestly believe, Daneel, that if Dors grew sick of me and wanted to leave me, she would stay on anyway for love of Raich. What gives her the mother instinct?"

"Whether an emotion is a matter of hormones or of positronic potentials makes little difference, surely. What counts is the outward show that is produced. Besides, as you say, Raich is lovable."

Seldon nodded somberly. "If Rashelle of Wye hadn't found him lovable, I would not be here today. I would have been shot down—" He stirred uneasily. "I hate to think of that, Daneel. It was such an entirely accidental and unpredictable event. How could psychohistory have helped in any way?"

"Have you not told me that at best, psychohistory can deal only in probabilities and with vast numbers; not with individuals?"

"But if the individual happens to be crucial—"

"I suspect you will find that no individual is ever truly crucial. Not even I—or you."

"Perhaps you're right. I find that no matter how I work away under these assumptions, I nevertheless think of myself as crucial, in a kind of supernormal egotism that transcends all sense. —And you are crucial, too, which is something I have come here to discuss with you, as frankly as possible. I must know."

"Know what?" The remains of the meal had been cleared away and the room's lighting had dimmed somewhat so that the walls seemed to close in and give the impression of great privacy.

Seldon said, "Joranum." He bit off the word, as though feeling it alone should be sufficient.

"Ah, yes."

"You know about him."

"Of course. How could I avoid knowing?"

"Well, I want to know about him, too."

"What do you want to know?"

"Come, Daneel, don't play with me. Is he dangerous?"

"Of course he is dangerous. Do you have any doubt of that?"

"I mean, to you? To your position as First Minister?"

"That is exactly what I mean. That is how he is dangerous."

"And you allow it?"

Demerzel leaned forward, elbow on the table between them. "There are things that don't wait upon my permission, Hari. Let us be philosophical about it. His Imperial Majesty, Cleon, First of that Name, has now been on the throne for eighteen years and for all that time I have been his First Minister, having served in a scarcely lesser capacity during the last years of the reign of his father. It is a long time and First Ministers rarely remain that long in power."

"You are not the ordinary First Minister, Daneel, and you know it. You *must* remain in power while psychohistory is being developed. Don't smile at me. It's true. When we first met, eight years ago, you told me the Empire was in a state of decay and decline. Have you changed your mind about that?"

"No, of course not."

"In fact, the decline is more marked now, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Though I labor to prevent that."

"And without you, what would happen? Joranum is raising the Empire against you."

"Trantor, Hari. Trantor. The provinces are solid and reasonably contented with my deeds so far, even in the midst of a declining economy and lessening trade."

"But Trantor is where it counts. Trantor, the Imperial world we're living on, the capital of the Empire, the core, the administrative center, is what can overthrow you. You cannot keep your post if Trantor says 'No'."

"I agree."

"And if you go, who will then take care of the provinces and what will keep the decline from being precipitated, and the Empire from degenerating rapidly into anarchy?"

"That is a possibility, certainly."

"So you must be doing something about it. Yugo is convinced you are in deadly danger and can't maintain your position. His intuition tells him so. Dors says the same thing, and explains it in terms of the Three Laws, or Four of—of—"

"Robotics," put in Demerzel.

"Young Raich seems attracted to Joranum's doctrines—being of Dahlite origin, you see. And I—I am uncertain, so I come to you for comfort, I suppose. Tell me that you have the situation well in hand."

"I would do so if I could. However, I have no comfort to offer. I *am* in danger."

"Are you doing nothing?"

"No. I'm doing a great deal to contain discontent and blunt Joranum's message. If I had not done so, then perhaps I would be out of office already. But what I'm doing is not enough."

Seldon hesitated. Finally, he said, "I am of the opinion that Joranum is actually a Mycogenian."

"Is that so?"

"It is my *opinion*. I had thought we might use that against him, but I hesitate to unleash the forces of bigotry."

"You are wise to hesitate. There are many things that might be done that have side-effects we do not want. You see, Hari, I don't fear leaving my post, if some successor could be found who would continue those principles which I have been using to keep the decline as slow as possible. On the other hand, if Joranum himself were to succeed me then that, in my opinion, would be fatal."

"Then anything we can do to stop him would be suitable."

"Not entirely. The Empire can grow anarchic even if Joranum is destroyed and I stay. I must not, then, do something that will destroy Joranum and allow me to stay, if that very deed promotes the fall of the Empire. I have not yet been able to think of anything I might do that would surely destroy Joranum and just as surely avoid anarchy."

"Minimalism," whispered Seldon.

"Pardon me?"

"Dors explained that you would be bound by minimalism."

"And so I am."

"Then my visit with you is a failure, Daneel."

"You mean that you came for comfort and didn't get it."

"I'm afraid so."

"But I saw you because I sought comfort as well."

"From me?

"From psychohistory. The route to safety that I cannot see, psychohistory should."

Seldon sighed heavily. "Daneel, psychohistory has not yet been developed to that point."

The First Minister looked at him gravely. "You've had eight years, Hari."

"It might be eight or eight hundred and it might not be developed to that point. It is an intractable problem."

Demerzel said, "I do not expect the technique to have been perfected, but you may have some sketch, some skeleton, some principle that you can use as guidance. Imperfectly, perhaps, but better than mere guesswork."

"Not even that," said Seldon mournfully. "Here's what it amounts to, then. You must remain in power and Joranum must be destroyed in such a way that Imperial stability is maintained as long as possible so that I may have a reasonable chance to work out psychohistory. This cannot be done, however, unless I work out psychohistory first. Is that it?"

"It would seem so, Hari."

"Then we argue in a useless circle and the Empire is destroyed."

"Unless something unforeseen happens. Unless you make something unforeseen happen."

"I? Daneel, how can I do it without psychohistory?"

"I don't know, Hari."

And Seldon rose to go, in despair.

12.

For days thereafter, Hari Seldon neglected his departmental duties to use his computer in its news-gathering mode.

There were not many computers capable of handling the daily news from 25 million worlds. There were a number of them at Imperial headquarters, where they were absolutely necessary. Some of the larger provincial capitals had them as well, though most were satisfied with hyperconnection to the Central Newspost on Trantor.

A computer at an important mathematics department could, if it were sufficiently advanced, be modified as an independent news-source, and Seldon had been careful to do that with his computer. It was, after all, necessary for his work on psychohistory, though the computer's capabilities were carefully ascribed to other, exceedingly plausible, reasons.

Ideally, the computer would report anything that was out of the way on any world of the Empire. A coded and unobtrusive warning light would make itself evident and Seldon could track it down easily. Such a light rarely showed, for the definition of "out of the way" was tight and intense, and dealt with large-scale and rare upheavals.

What one did in its absence was to ring in various worlds at random; not all twenty-five million, of course, but some dozens. It was a depressing and even debilitating task for there were no worlds that didn't have their daily, relatively minor, catastrophes. A volcanic eruption here, a flood there, an economic collapse of one sort or another yonder and, of course, riots. There had not been a day in the last thousand years that there had not been riots over something or other on each of a hundred or more different worlds.

Naturally, such things had to be discounted. One could scarcely worry about riots any more than one could about volcanic eruptions when both were constants on inhabited worlds. Rather, if a day should come in which not one riot was reported anywhere that might be a sign of something so unusual as to warrant the gravest concern.

Concern was what Seldon could not make himself feel. The provinces, with all their disorders and misfortunes, were like the ocean on a peaceful day, with a gentle swell and minor heavings, but no more. He found no evidence of any overall situation that clearly showed a decline in the last eight years, or the last eighty, perhaps. Yet Demerzel (in Demerzel's absence, Seldon could no longer think of him as "Daneel") said the decline was continuing and he had his finger on the Empire's pulse from day to day in ways that Seldon could not duplicate—until such time as he would have the guiding power of psychohistory at his disposal.

It could be that the decline was so small that it was unnoticeable till some crucial point was reached; like a domicile that slowly wears out and deteriorates, showing no signs of that deterioration until one night when the roof collapses.

When would the roof collapse? That was the problem and to it Seldon had no answer.

And, on occasion, Seldon would check on Trantor itself. There, the news was always considerably more substantial. For one thing, Trantor was the most highly populated of all the worlds, with its 40 billion people. For another, its eighty sectors formed a mini-Empire all its own. For a third, there were the tedious rounds of governmental functions and the doings of the Imperial family to follow.

What struck Seldon's eyes, however, was in the Dahl Section. The elections for the Sectional Council had placed five Joranumites into office. This was the first time, according to the commentary, that Joranumites had achieved Sectional office.

It was not surprising. Dahl was a Joranumite stronghold if any section was, but Seldon found it a disturbing indication of the progress being made by the demagogue. He faxed the item and took it home that evening.

Raich looked up from his computer as Seldon entered and apparently felt the need to explain himself. "I'm helping Mom on some reference material she needs," he said.

"What about your own work?"

"Done, Dad. All done."

"Good. —Look at this." He placed the fax before Raich's eyes.

Raich glanced at it and said, "Yes, I know."

"You do?"

"Sure. I keep track of Dahl usually. You know. Hometown."

"And what do you think about it?"

"I'm not surprised. Are you? The rest of Trantor treats Dahl like dirt. Why shouldn't they go for Joranum's views?"

"Do you go for them also?"

"Well—" Raich twisted his face thoughtfully. "I got to admit some things he says appeal to me. He says he wants equality for all people. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing at all, if he means it. If he's sincere. If he isn't just using it as a ploy to get votes."

"True enough, Dad, but most Dahlites probably figure: What's there to lose? We don't have equality now, though the laws say we do."

"It's a hard thing to legislate."

"That's not something to warm you when you're freezing."

Seldon was thinking rapidly. He had been thinking since he had come across this item. He said, "Raich, you've never been in Dahl since your mother and I took you out of the Section, have you?"

"Sure I was, when I went with you to Dahl five years ago on your visit there."

"Yes, yes," Seldon waved a hand in dismissal, "but that doesn't count. We stayed at the Intersectional Hotel which was not in the least Dahlite in atmosphere and, as I recall, Dors never once let you out on the streets alone. After all, you were only fifteen."

"I remember that very well, Dad. I was fully fifteen, as I recall."

"You have a sharp tongue, young man."

"No offense, Dad, but I didn't like it at the time."

"In that case, Raich, how would it be if you were to visit Dahl now, alone, in charge of yourself—now that you're fully twenty?"

Raich chuckled. "Mom would never allow that."

"I don't say that I enjoy the prospect of facing her with it, but I don't intend to ask her permission. The question is: Would you be willing to do this for me?"

"Out of curiosity? Sure. I'd like to see what's happened to the old place."

"Can you spare the time from your studies?"

"Sure. I'll never miss a week or so. Besides, we can record the lectures and the viewings and I'll catch up when I get back. I can get permission. After all, my old man's on the faculty—unless you've been fired, Dad."

"Not yet. But I'm not thinking of this as a fun vacation."

"I'd be surprised if you did. I don't think you know what a fun vacation is, Dad. I'm surprised you know the phrase."

"Don't be impertinent. When you go there, I want you to meet with Laskin Joranum."

Raich looked startled. "How do I do that? I don't know where he's gonna be."

"He's going to be in Dahl. He's been asked to speak to the Council with its new Joranumite members. We'll find out the exact day and you can go a few days earlier."

"And how do I get to see him, Dad? I don't figure he keeps open house."

"I don't either, but I'll leave that up to you. You would have known how to do it when you were twelve. I hope your keen edge hasn't blunted too badly in the intervening years."

Raich smiled. "I hope not. But suppose I do see him. What then?"

"Well, then, find out what you can. What he's really planning. What he's really thinking."

"Do you really think he's gonna tell me?"

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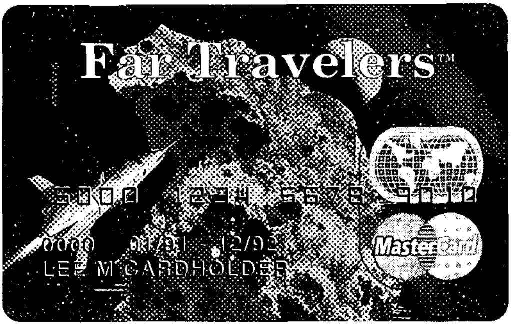

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"I wouldn't be surprised if he does. You have the trick of inspiring confidence, you miserable youngster. Let's talk about it."

And so they did. Several times.

Seldon's thoughts were painful. He was not at all sure where all this was leading to, but he dared not consult Yugo Amaryl, or Demerzel, or (most of all) Dors Venabili. They might stop him. They might prove to him that his idea was a poor one, and he didn't want that proof. What he planned seemed the only gateway to salvation and he didn't want it blocked.

But did the gateway exist at all? Raich was the only one, it seemed to Seldon, who could possibly manage to worm himself into Joranum's confidence, but was Raich the proper tool for the purpose? He was a Dahlite and sympathetic to Joranum. How far could Seldon trust him?

Horrible! Seldon had never had occasion to mistrust Raich before.

13.

If Seldon doubted the efficacy of his notion; if he feared that it might explode matters prematurely, or move them desperately in the wrong direction; if he was filled with an agonizing doubt as to whether Raich could be entirely trusted to fulfill his part suitably; he nevertheless had no doubt—no doubt whatever—as to what Venabili's reaction would be when presented with the *fait accompli.*

And he was not disappointed, if that was quite the word to express his emotion.

Yet in a manner, he *was* disappointed, for she did not raise her voice in horror as he had somehow thought she would; as he had prepared himself to withstand.

But how was he to know? She was not as other women were and he had never seen her truly angry. Perhaps it was not in her to be truly angry, or what he would consider to be *truly* angry.

She was merely cold-eyed and spoke with low-voiced bitter disapproval. "You sent him to Dahl? Alone?" Very softly. Questioningly.

For a moment, Seldon quailed at the quiet voice. Then he said firmly, "I had to. It was necessary."

"Let me understand. You sent him to that den of thieves; that haunt of assassins; that conglomeration of all that is criminal?"

"Not at all, Dors. You anger me when you speak like that. I would expect only a cheap bigot to make use of those stereotypes."

"You deny that Dahl is as I have described?"

"Of course I deny it. There are criminals and slums in Dahl. I know that very well. We both know that. But not all of Dahl is that. And there are criminals and slums in every section, even in the Imperial section and in Streeling."

"There are degrees, are there not? One is not ten. If all the Sections are crime-ridden; if all the worlds are crime-ridden, Dahl is among the most riddled, is it not? You have the computer. Check the statistics."

"I don't have to. Dahl is the poorest section on Trantor and there is a positive correlation between poverty, misery, and crime. I grant you that."

"You grant me that! And you sent him alone? You might have gone with him, or asked me to go with him, or sent half a dozen of his schoolmates with him. They would have been glad of a respite from their work, I'm sure."

"What I need him for requires him to be alone."

"And what do you need him for?"

But Seldon was stubbornly silent about that.

Venabili said, "Has it come to this? You don't trust me?"

"It's a gamble. I alone dare take the risk. I can't involve you or anyone else."

"But it's not you taking the risk. It's poor Raich."

"He's not taking any risk," said Seldon impatiently. "He's twenty years old, young and vigorous, and as sturdy as a tree, and I don't mean the saplings we have here under glass in Trantor. I'm talking about a good tree in the Heliconian forests. And he's a Twister, which the Dahlites aren't."

"You and your Twisting," said Venabili, her coldness not thawing a whit. "You think that's the answer to everything. The Dahlites carry knives. Every one of them. Blasters, too, I'm sure."

"I don't know about blasters. The laws are pretty strict when it comes to missile weapons. As for knives, I'm positive Raich carries one. He carries it on campus here where it's strictly against the law. Do you think he won't have one in Dahl?"

Venabili remained silent.

Seldon was also silent for a few minutes, then decided it might be time to placate her. He said, "Look, I'll tell you this much. I'm hoping he'll see Joranum, who will be visiting Dahl."

"Oh? And what do you expect Raich to do? Fill him with bitter regrets over his wicked politics and send him back to Mycogen?"

"Come. Really. If you're going to take this sardonic attitude, there's no use discussing it. What I expect him to do," and his voice faltered for a moment, "is save the Empire."

"To be sure. That would be much easier."

Seldon's voice firmed. "It's what I expect. You have no solution. Demerzel himself has no solution. He as much as said that the solution rests with me. That's what I'm striving for, and that's what I need Raich for in Dahl. After all, you know that ability of his to inspire affection. It worked with us, and I'm convinced it will work with Joranum. If I am right, all may be well."

Venabili's eyes widened a trifle. "Are you now going to tell me that you are being guided by psychohistory?"

"No. I'm not going to lie to you. I have not reached the point where I can be guided in any way by psychohistory, but Yugo is constantly talking about intuition, and I have mine."

"Intuition! What's that? Define it!"

"Easily. Intuition is the art, peculiar to the human mind, of working out the correct answer from data which is, in itself, incomplete, or even perhaps misleading."

"And you've done it."

And Seldon said, with firm conviction, "Yes, I have."

But to himself, he thought what he dared not share with Dors Venabili. What if Raich's charm were gone? Or, worse, what if the consciousness of being a Dahlite became too strong for him?

14.

Billibotton was Billibotton; dirty, sprawling, dark, sinuous Billibotton; exuding decay and yet full of a vitality that Raich was convinced was to be found nowhere else on Trantor. Perhaps it was to be found nowhere else in the Empire, though Raich knew nothing, first-hand, of any world but Trantor.

He had last seen Billibotton when he was not much more than twelve, but even the people seemed to be the same; still a mixture of the hangdog and the irreverent; filled with a synthetic pride and a grumbling resentment; marked (the men at least) by their dark, rich mustaches, and the women by their sack-like dresses that now looked tremendously slatternly to Raich's older and more worldly-wise eyes.

How could women with dresses like that attract men? —But it was a foolish question. Even when he was twelve, he had had a pretty clear idea of how easily and quickly they could be removed.

So he stood there, lost in thought and memory, passing along a street of store-windows and trying to convince himself that he remembered this particular place or that, and wondering, if among them all, there were people who he did remember and who were now eight years older. Those, perhaps, who had been his boyhood friends, and he thought uneasily of the fact that while he remembered some of the nicknames they had pinned on each other, he could not remember any real names.

In fact, the gaps in his memory were enormous. It was not that eight years was such a long time, but it was two-fifths of the lifetime of a twenty-year-old, and his life since leaving Billibotton had been so different that all before it had faded like a misty dream.

But the smells were there. He stopped outside a bakery, low and dingy, and smelled the coconut-icing that reeked through the air, and that he had never quite smelled elsewhere. Even when he had stopped to buy tarts with coconut-icing; even when they were advertised as "Dahl-style," they had been faint imitations, no more.

He felt strongly tempted. Well, why not? He had the money, and Dors was not there to wrinkle her nose and wonder aloud how clean—or, more likely, not clean—the place might be. Who worried about *clean* in the old days?

The shop was dim and it took a while for Raich's eyes to accommodate. There were a few low tables in the place, with a couple of rather insubstantial chairs at each, undoubtedly where people might have a light repast, the equivalent of moka and tarts. One young man sat at one of the tables, an empty cup before him, wearing a once-white T-shirt that probably would have looked even dirtier in a better light.

The baker or, in any case, a server, stepped out from a room in the rear and said, in rather surly fashion, "What'll ya have?"

"A coke-icer," said Raich, in just as surly a fashion (he would not be a Billibottoner if he displayed courtesy) and used the slang term he remembered well from the old days.

The term was still current, for the server handed him the correct item, using his bare fingers for the purpose. The boy Raich would have taken that for granted, but now the man Raich felt taken slightly aback.

"You want a bag?"

"No," said Raich, "I'll eat it here." He took it from the other's hand and bit into its richness, his eyes half-closing as he did so. It had been a rare treat in his boyhood; sometimes when he had scrounged the necessary coin to buy it with; sometimes when he had received a bite from a temporarily wealthy friend; most often when he had appropriated it when no one was watching. Now he could buy as many as he wished.

"Hey," said a voice.

Raich opened his eyes. It was the man at the table, scowling at him.

Raich said gently, "Are you speaking to me, bub?"

"Yeah. What'chuh doin?"

"Eatin' a coke-icer. What's it to ya?" Automatically, he had assumed the Billibotton way of talking. It was no strain at all.

"Whatchuh doin' in Billibotton?"

"Born here. Raised here. In a bed. Not in a street, like you." The insult came easily, as though he had never left home.

"That so? You dress pretty good for a Billibottoner. Pretty fancy. Got a perfume-stink about ya?" And he held up a little finger to imply effeminacy.

"I won't talk about your stink. I went up in the world."

"Up in the world? La-dee-da." Two other men stepped into the bakery. Raich frowned slightly, for he wasn't sure whether they had been summoned or not. The man at the table said to the newcomers, "This guy's gone up in the world. Says he's a Billibottoner."

One of the two newcomers shambled a mock-salute and grinned with no appearance of amiability. His teeth were discolored. "Ain't that nice? It's always good to see a Billibottoner go up in the world. Gives them a chance to help their poor unforchnit section-people. Like money. You can always spare a little money for the poor, hey?"

"How much you got, mister?" said the other, the grin disappearing.

"Hey," said the man behind the counter. "All you guys get out of my store. I don't want no trouble in here."

"There'll be no trouble," said Raich. "I'm leaving."

He made to go, but the seated man put a leg in the way. "Don't go, cockamamie. We'd miss yer company."

(The man behind the counter, clearly fearing the worst, disappeared into the rear.)

Raich smiled. He said, "One time when I was in Billibotton, guys, I was with my old man and old lady, and there were ten guys who stopped us. Ten. I counted them. We had to take care of them."

"Yeah?" said the one who had been speaking. "Yer old man took care of ten?"

"My old man? Nah. He wouldn't waste his time. My old lady did. And I can do it better than she can. And there are only three of you. So, if you don't mind, out of the way."

"Sure. Just leave all your money. Some of your clothes, too."

The man at the table rose to his feet. There was a knife in his hand.

"There you are," said Raich. "Now you're going to waste my time." He had finished his coke-icer and he half-turned. Then, as quickly as thought, he anchored himself to the table while his right leg shot out and the point of his toe landed unerringly in the groin of the man with the knife.

Down he went, with a loud cry; up went the table, driving the second man toward the wall and keeping him there, while Raich's right arm flashed out with the edge of the palm striking hard against the larynx of the third, who coughed and went down.

It had taken two seconds and Raich now stood there with a knife in each hand and said, "Now which one of you wants to move."

They glared at him but remained frozen in place, and Raich said, "In that case, I will now leave."

But the server, who had been behind the counter, must have had a rear entrance available to him, and he must have been able to summon help, for three more men had now entered the store, while the server screeched, "Troublemakers! Nothing but troublemakers!"

The newcomers were dressed alike in what was obviously a uniform, but one that Raich had never seen.

Trousers were tucked into boots, loose green T-shirts were belted, and odd semi-spherical hats that looked vaguely comic were perched on top of their heads. On the front of the left shoulder of each T-shirt was a large capital J.

They had the Dahlite look about them, but not quite the Dahlite mustache. The mustaches were black and thick, but they were carefully trimmed at lip-level and were kept from luxuriating too widely. Raich allowed himself an internal sneer. They lacked the vigor of his own wild mustache, but he had to admit they looked neat and clean.

The leader of the three men said, "I'm Corporal Quinber. What's been

going on here?"

The three Billibottoners were scrambling to their feet, clearly the worse for wear. One was still doubled over, one was rubbing his throat and the third acted as though his shoulder had been wrenched.

The Corporal stared at them with a philosophic eye, while his two men blocked the door. He turned to Raich, as the one man who seemed untouched. "Are you a Billibottoner, boy?"

"Born and bred, but I've lived elsewhere for eight years." He let the Billibotton accent recede, but it was still there, at least to the extent that it existed in the Corporal's speech as well. There were other parts of Dahl aside from Billibotton, and some parts with considerable aspirations to gentility.

Raich said, "Are you the police? I don't seem to recall the uniform you're—"

"We're not the police. You won't find the police in Billibotton much. We're the Joranum Guard and we keep the peace here. We know these three, and they've been warned. We'll take care of them. *You're* our problem, buster. Name. Reference number."

Raich told them.

"And what happened here?"

Raich told them.

"And your business here?"

Raich said, "Look here. Do you have the right to question me? If you're not the police—"

"Listen," said the Corporal in a hard voice, "Don't question rights. We're all there are in Billibotton and we have the right because we take the right. You say you beat up these three men and I believe you. But you won't beat us up, so don't try. We're not allowed to carry blasters—" and with that the Corporal, with no hurry, produced a blaster.

"Now tell me your business here."

Raich sighed. If he had gone directly to Section Hall, as he ought to have done—if he had not stopped to drown himself in nostalgia for Billibotton and coke-icers—

He said, "I have come on important business to see Mr. Joranum and since you seem to be part of his organi—"

"To see the Leader?"

"Yes, Corporal?"

"With two knives on you?"

"For self-defense here. There was no thought of having them on me when I saw Mr. Joranum."

"So you say. We're taking you into custody, mister. We'll get to the bottom of this. It may take time, but we will."

"But you don't have the right. You're not the legally const—"

"Well, find someone to complain to. Till then, you're ours."

And the knives were taken away from him, and Raich was suddenly conscious of having a bad headache.

15.

Cleon I was no longer quite the handsome young monarch of the holographs. Perhaps he still was—in the holographs—but his mirror told a different story. His most recent birthday had been celebrated with the usual pomp and ritual, but it was his fortieth just the same.

Nothing wrong with forty. His health was perfect. He had gained a little weight, but not much.

His face would perhaps look older if it were not for the microadjustments that were made periodically, and that did give him a slightly enameled look.

He had been on the throne eighteen years. That was already one of the longer reigns of the century and he felt there was nothing that might necessarily keep him from reigning another forty years and perhaps having the longest reign in Imperial history as a result.

He looked at the mirror again and thought he looked a bit better if he left it plane, and did not actualize the third dimension.

Now take Demerzel; faithful, reliable, necessary, *unbearable* Demerzel. No change in him. He maintained his appearance and, as far as Cleon knew, there had been no microadjustments, either. Of course, Demerzel was so close-mouthed about everything. And he had never been *young.*

There had been no young look about him when he first served Cleon's father and Cleon had been the boyish Prince Imperial. And there was no young look about him now. Was it better to have looked old at the start and to avoid change afterward?

Change!

It reminded him that he had called in Demerzel for a purpose and not just in order that he might stand there while the Emperor ruminated. Demerzel would take too much Imperial rumination as a sign of old age.

"Demerzel," he said.

"Sire?"

"This fellow, Joranum. I am tired of hearing of him."

"There is no reason you should hear of him, Sire. He is one of those phenomena that are thrown to the surface of the news for a while and then disappear."

"But he *doesn't* disappear."

"Sometimes it takes a while, Sire."

"What do you think of him, Demerzel?"

"He is dangerous, but has a certain popularity. It is the popularity that increases the danger."

"If you find him dangerous and if I find him annoying, why must we wait? Can't he simply be imprisoned or executed, or something?"

"The political situation on Trantor, Sire, is delicate—"

"It is always delicate. When have you told me that it is anything but delicate?"

"We live in delicate times, Sire. It would be useless to move strongly against him if that would but exacerbate the danger."

"I don't like it. I may not be widely read. An Emperor doesn't have the time to be widely read, but I know my Imperial history, at any rate. There have been a number of cases of these populists, as they call them, that have seized power in the last couple of centuries. In every case, they reduced the Emperor of the times to a figurehead. I do not wish to be a figurehead, Demerzel."

"It is unthinkable that you would be, Sire."

"It won't be unthinkable if you do nothing."

"I am attempting to take measures, Sire, but cautious ones."

"There's one at least who isn't cautious. A month or so ago, a University professor, a *professor*, stopped a Joranumite riot single–handed. He stepped right in and put a stop to it."

"So he did, Sire. How did you come to hear of it?"

"Because he is a professor I am interested in. How is it you didn't speak to me of this?"

Demerzel said, almost obsequiously, "Would it be right for me to trouble you with every insignificant detail that crosses my desk?"

"Insignificant? This man who took action was Hari Seldon."

"That was indeed his name."

"And the name was a familiar one. Did he not present a paper, some years ago, that interested us?"

"Yes, Sire?"

Cleon looked pleased. "As you see, I *do* have a memory. I need not depend on my Ministers for everything. I interviewed him on the matter of his paper, did I not?"

"Your memory is indeed flawless, Sire."

"What happened to his idea? It was a fortune-telling device. My flawless memory does not bring to mind what he called it."

"Psychohistory, Sire. It was not precisely a fortune-telling device, but a theory as to ways of predicting general trends in future human history."

"And what happened to it?"

"Nothing, Sire. As I explained at the time, the idea turned out to be wholly impractical. It was a colorful idea, but a useless one."

"Yet he is capable of taking action to stop a riot. Would he have dared do this if he didn't know in advance he would succeed? Isn't that evidence that this—what—psychohistory is working?"

"It is merely evidence that Hari Seldon is foolhardy, Sire. Even if the psychohistoric theory were practical, it would not have been able to yield results involving a single person or a single action."

"You're not the mathematician, Demerzel. He is. I think it is time I questioned him again."

"It would be a useless—"

"Demerzel, I desire it. See to it."

"Yes, Sire."

16.

Raich was listening in an agonized impatience that he was trying not to show. He was sitting in an improvised cell deep in the warrens of Billibotton, having been passed along corridors he no longer remembered. (*He*, who in the old days could have threaded those same corridors unerringly and have lost any pursuer.)

The man with him, clad in the green of the Joranumite Guards, was either a missionary, a brain-washer, or a kind of theologian-manqué. At any rate, he had announced his name, Sander Nee, and was delivering a long message in a thick Dahlite accent that he had clearly learned by heart.

"If the people of Dahl want to enjoy equality, they must show themselves worthy of it. Good rule, quiet behavior, seemly pleasures, are all requirements. Aggressiveness, the bearing of knives, are the accusations others make against us to justify their intolerance. We must be clean in word and—"

Raich broke in. "I agree with you, Guardsman Nee, every word. —But I must see Mr. Joranum"

Slowly, the Guardsman shook his head. "You can't lessen you got some appointment, some permission."

"Look, I'm the son of an important professor at Streeling University, a mathematics professor."

"Don't know no professor. —I thought you said you was from Dahl."

"Of course I am. Can't you tell the way I talk."

"And you got an old man who's a professor at a big University? That don't sound likely."

"Well, he's my foster father."

The guardsman absorbed that and shook his head. "You know anyone in Dahl?"

"There's Mother Rittah. She'll know me." (She had been very old when she had known him. She might be senile by now, or dead.)

"Never heard of her."

(Who else? He had never known anyone likely to penetrate the dim consciousness of this man facing him. His best friend had been another youngster named Smoodgie—or at least that was the only name he knew him by. Even in his desperation, Raich could not see himself saying: Do you know someone my age named Smoodgie?)

Finally, he said, "There's Yugo Amaryl."

A dim spark seemed to light Nee's eyes. "Who?"

"Yugo Amaryl," said Raich eagerly. "He works for my foster-father at the University."

"He a Dahlite, too? Everyone at the University Dahlites?"

"Just he and I. He was a heat-sinker."

"What's he doing at the University?"

"My father took him out of the heat-sinks eight years ago."

"Well— I'll send someone."

Raich had to wait. Even if he broke out, where would he go in the intricate corridors of Billibotton without being picked up instantly? He no longer had the map of it in his head.

Twenty minutes passed before Nee returned and with him was the Corporal who had arrested him in the first place. Raich felt a little hope; the Corporal, at least, might conceivably have some brains.

The Corporal said, "Who is this Dahlite you know?"

"Yugo Amaryl, Corporal, a heat-sinker, whom my father found here in Dahl eight years ago and took with him."

"Why did he do that?"

"My father thought Yugo could do more important things than heat-sink, Corporal."

"Like what."

"Mathematics. He—"

The Corporal held up his hand. "What heat-sink did he work in?"

Raich thought a moment. "I was only a kid then, but it was at Tyrrell Two, I think."

"Close enough. Tyrrell Three."

"Then you know about him, Corporal?"

"Not personally, but the story is famous in the heat-sinks and I've worked there, too. And maybe that's how you've heard it. Have you any evidence that you really know Yugo Amaryl?"

"Look. Let me tell you what I'd like to do. I'm going to write down my name on a piece of paper, and my father's name. Then I'm going to write down one word. If you can get in touch, any way you want, with some official in Mr. Joranum's group—Mr. Joranum will be here in Dahl tomorrow—and just read him my name, my father's name, and the one word. If nothing happens, then I'll stay here till I rot, I suppose, but I don't think nothing will happen. I think they will get me out of here in three seconds and you'll get a promotion for passing along the information. If you refuse to do this, then, when they find out I am here, and they will, you will be in the deepest possible trouble. After all, if you know that Yugo Amaryl went off with a bigshot mathematician, just tell yourself that same bigshot mathematician is my father. His name is Hari Seldon."

The Corporal's face showed clearly that the name was not unknown to him.

He said, "What's the one word you're going to write down?"

"Psychohistory."

The Corporal frowned. "What's that?"

"That doesn't matter. Just pass it along and see what happens."

The Corporal handed him a small sheet of paper, torn out of a notebook. "All right. Write it down and we'll see what happens."

Raich realized he was trembling. He wanted very much to know what would happen. It depended entirely on who it was that the Corporal would talk to, and what magic the word would carry with it.

17.

Hari Seldon watched the raindrops form on the wrap-around windows of the Imperial ground-car and a sense of nostalgia stabbed at him unbearably.

It was only the second time in his eight years on Trantor that he had stepped out from under the Dome in order to visit the Emperor in the only open land on the planet, and both times the weather had been bad. The first time, shortly after he had arrived in Trantor, the bad weather had merely irritated him. He found it no novelty. His home world of Helicon had its share of storms, after all, particularly in the part in which he had been brought up.

But now he had been for eight years in make-believe weather, in which storms consisted of computerized cloudiness at random intervals, with regular light rains during the sleeping times. Raging winds were replaced by zephyrs, and there were no extremes of heat and cold—merely little changes that made you undo the ziplock in front of your shirt now and then, or throw on a light wrap now and then. And he had heard complaints about even so mild a deviation.

But now there was real rain coming down drearily from a cold sky and he had not seen such a thing in years. And he loved it, that was the thing. It reminded him of Helicon, of young days, of relatively carefree days, and he wondered if he might persuade the driver to take the long way round.

Impossible! The Emperor wanted to see him and it was a long enough trip by ground car, even if one went in a straight line, with no interfering traffic. The Emperor, of course, would not wait.

It was a different Cleon from the one Seldon had seen eight years before. He had put on about ten pounds and there was a sulkiness about his face.

Cleon I met him alone—not quite alone, however, for an Emperor is never alone. There were two soldiers stationed strategically against the wall, looking as though they had been carved from some cold plastic and each with his hand on what Seldon was sure was a loaded stun-gun. This was a routine precaution against any conspirator arriving in the guise of friendship. Of course, the Emperor had to trust the soldiers, and history had made it plain that that was not always safe, either.

Seldon waited to be spoken to, and the Emperor said, in an ordinary voice, "Glad to see you, Professor. Let us dispense with formalities, as we did on the former occasion on which I met you."

"Yes, Sire," said Seldon, stiffly. It was not always safe to be informal merely because the Emperor ordered you to be so in an effusive moment.

Cleon I gestured imperceptibly, and there were those who might be unseen but who watched carefully for imperceptible gestures, and at once the room came alive with automation as the table set itself and as dishes began to appear. Seldon, confused, could not follow the details.

The Emperor said, casually, "You will eat with me, Seldon."

It had the formal intonation of a question but the force, somehow, of an order.

"I would be honored, Sire," said Seldon. He looked about cautiously. He knew very well that one did not (or, at any rate, should not) ask questions of the Emperor, but he saw no way out of it. He said, rather quietly, trying to make it not sound like a question, "The First Minister will not eat with us?"

"He will not," said Cleon. "He has other tasks on hand and I wish, in any case, to speak to you privately."

They ate quietly for a while, Cleon gazing at him fixedly and Seldon smiling tentatively. Cleon had no reputation for cruelty or even for irresponsibility, but he could, in theory, have Seldon arrested on some vague charge and, if the Emperor wished to exert his influence, the case might never come to trial. It was always best to avoid notice and, at the moment, Seldon couldn't manage it.

Surely, it had been worse eight years ago, when he had been brought into the Presence under armed guard. —Seldon did not feel relieved, however.

Then Cleon spoke. "Seldon," he said. "The First Minister is of great use to me, yet I feel that, at times, people may think I do not have a mind of my own. Do you think that?"

"Never, Sire," said Seldon, calmly. No use protesting too much.

"I don't believe you. However, I do have a mind of my own and I recall that when you first came to Trantor you had this psychohistory thing you were playing with."

"I'm sure you also remember, Sire," said Seldon, softly, "that I explained at the time it was a mathematical amusement without practical application."

"So you said. Do you still say so?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Have you been working on it since?"

"On occasion, I amuse myself with it, but it comes to nothing. Chaos unfortunately interferes and predictability is not—"

The Emperor interrupted. "There is a specific problem I wish you to tackle. —Do help yourself to the dessert, Seldon. It is very good."

"What is the problem, Sire?"

"This man, Joranum. Demerzel tells me, oh, so politely that I cannot arrest this man, and I cannot use armed force to crush his followers. He says it will simply make the situation worse."

"If the First Minister says so, I presume it is so."

"But I do not want to bother with this man, Joranum. I will not be his puppet. Demerzel does *nothing*."

"I am sure that is not so, and that he is doing what he can, Sire."

"If he is working to alleviate the problem, he certainly is not keeping me informed."

"That may be, Sire, out of a natural desire to keep you above the battle. The First Minister may feel that if Joranum should—if he should—"

"Take over," said Cleon, with a tone of infinite distaste.

"Yes, Sire. It would not then do to have it appear that you were personally opposed to him. You must remain untouched for the sake of the stability of the Empire."

"I would much rather assure the stability of the Empire without Joranum. What do you suggest, Seldon?"

"I, Sire?"

"You, Seldon," said Cleon, impatiently. "Let me say that I don't believe you when you say that psychohistory is just a game. Demerzel stays friendly with you. Do you think I am an idiot not to know that? He *expects* something from you. He expects psychohistory from you, and since I am no fool, I expect it, too. —Seldon, are you *for* Joranum? The truth!"

"No, Sire, I am not for him. I consider him an utter danger to the Empire."

"Very well, I believe you. You stopped a Joranumite riot at your University grounds single-handed, I understand."

"It was pure impulse on my part, Sire."

"Tell that to fools, not to me. You had it worked out by psychohistory."

"Sire!"

"Don't protest. What are you doing about Joranum? You must be doing something if you are on the side of the Empire."

"Sire," said Seldon, cautiously, uncertain as to how much the Emperor knew. "I have sent my son to meet with Joranum in the Dahl sector."

"Why?"

"My son is a Dahlite, and shrewd. He may discover something of use to us."

"May?"

"Only may, Sire."

"You'll keep me informed?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And, Seldon, do *not* tell me that psychohistory is just a game; that it does not exist. I do not want to hear that. I expect you to do something. I will not have it otherwise. You may go."

Seldon returned to Streeling in a far grimmer mood than he had left. Cleon had sounded as though he would not accept failure.

It all depended on Raich now.

18.

Raich sat in the anteroom of a public building in Dahl into which he had never ventured, never could have ventured, as a ragamuffin child. He felt, in all truth, a little uneasy about it now, as though he had found himself in a forbidden place.

He tried to look calm, trustworthy, lovable.

Dad had told him that that was a quality he carried about with him, but he had never been conscious of it. If it came about naturally, he would probably spoil it by trying too hard to *seem* what he really *was*.

He tried relaxing while keeping an eye on the official who was manipulating a computer at the desk. He was not a Dahlite. He was, in fact, Gambol Deen Namarti, who had been with Joranum at the meeting with Dad which Raich had attended.

Every once in a while, Namarti would look up from his desk and glance at Raich out of an eye that seemed hostile. This Namarti wasn't buying Raich's lovability. Raich could see that.

Raich did not try to meet hostility with a friendly smile. It would have seemed too artificial. He simply waited. He had gotten this far. If Joranum arrived, as he was expected to, Raich would have a chance to speak to him.

Joranum did arrive, sweeping in, smiling out of a face that was clearly meant to be trustworthy and lovable. Namarti's hand came up and Joranum stopped. They spoke together in a low voice while Raich watched intently and tried in vain to seem as if he wasn't. It seemed plain to Raich that Namarti was arguing against the meeting and Raich bridled a bit at that. Why was Namarti so immune to Raich's lovability?

Then Joranum looked at Raich, smiled, and pushed Namarti to one side. It occurred to Raich that Namarti was the brains of the team but that it was Joranum who clearly had the charisma

Joranum strode toward him and held out a plump, slightly moist hand. "Well, well. Professor Seldon's young man. How are you?"

"Fine. Thank you, sir."

"You had some trouble getting here, I understand."

"Not too much, sir."

"And you've come with a message from your father, I trust. I hope he is reconsidering his decision and has decided to join me in my great crusade."

"I don't think so, sir."

Joranum frowned slightly. "Are you here without his knowledge?"

"No, sir. He sent me."

"I see. —Are you hungry, lad?"

"Not at the moment, sir."

"Then would you mind if I eat? I don't get much time for the ordinary amenities of life," and he smiled broadly.

"It's all right with me, sir."

Joranum unwrapped a sandwich and took a bite. His voice slightly muffled, he said, "And why did he send you, son?"

Raich shrugged. "I have the idea he thought I might find out something about you that he could use against you. He's heart and soul with First Minister Demerzel."

"And you're not?"

"No, sir. I'm a Dahlite."

"I know you are, Mr. Seldon, but what does that mean?"

"It means I'm oppressed so I'm on your side and I want to help you. Of course, I wouldn't want my father to know."

"There's no reason he should know. How do you propose to help me?" He glanced quickly at Namarti, who was leaning against his desk, listening, with his arms folded and his expression lowering. "Do you know anything about psychohistory?"

"No, sir. My father don't talk to me about that, and if he did, I wouldn't get it. I don't think he's getting anywhere with that stuff."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure. There's a guy there, Yugo Amaryl, also a Dahlite, who talks about it sometimes. I'm sure nothing is happening."

"Ah! And can I see Yugo Amaryl some time, do you suppose?"

"I don't think so. He ain't much for Demerzel but he's all for my father. He wouldn't cross him."

"But you would?"

Raich looked unhappy and he muttered, stubbornly, "I'm a Dahlite."

Joranum cleared his throat. "Then let me ask you again. How do you propose to help me, young man?"

"I've got something I can tell you that maybe you won't believe."

"Indeed? Try me. If I don't believe it, I will tell you so."

"It's about First Minster Eto Demerzel."

"Well?"

Raich looked about uneasily. "Can anyone hear me?"

"Just Namarti and myself."

"All right, then, listen. This guy Demerzel ain't a guy. He's a robot."

"What!" exploded Joranum.

Raich felt moved to explain. "A robot is a mechanical man, sir. He ain't human. He's a machine."

Namarti broke out passionately, "Jojo, don't believe that. It's ridiculous."

But Joranum held up an admonitory hand. His eyes were gleaming. "Why do you say that?"

"My father was in Mycogen once. He told me all about it. In Mycogen, they talk about robots a lot."

"Yes, I know. At least I have heard so."

"The Mycogenians believe that robots were once very common among their ancestors, but they were wiped out."

Namarti's eyes narrowed and he put in, "But what makes you think that Demerzel is a robot? From what little I have heard of these fantasies, robots are made out of metal, aren't they?"

"That's so," said Raich, earnestly. "But what I heard is that there were a few robots that look just like human beings and they live forever—"

Namarti shook his head violently, "Legends! Ridiculous legends! Jojo, why are we listening—"

But Joranum was shaking his head. "No, G.D. I want to listen. I've heard these legends, too."

"But it's nonsense, Jojo."

"Don't be in such a rush to say 'Nonsense.' And even if it were, people dine out on nonsense and live and die by it. It's not what *is* so much as what people *think* is. —Tell me, young man, putting legends to one side, what makes you think Demerzel is a robot? Let's suppose that robots exist. What is it, then, about Demerzel that makes you say *he* is a robot? Did he tell you so?"

"No, sir," said Raich.

"Did your father tell you so?" asked Joranum.

"No, sir. It's just my own idea, but I'm sure of it."

"Why? What makes you so sure?"

"It's just something about him. He doesn't change. He doesn't get older. He doesn't show emotions. Something about him *looks* like he's made of metal."

Joranum sat back in his chair and looked at Raich for an extended time. It was almost possible to hear his thoughts buzzing.

Finally, he said, "Suppose he *is* a robot, young man. Why should you care? Does it matter to you?"

"Of course, it matters to me," said Raich. "I'm a human being. I don't want no robot in charge of me and running the Empire."

Joranum turned to Namarti with a gesture of eager approval. "Do you hear that, G.D. 'I'm a human being. I don't want no robot in charge of me and running the Empire.' Put him on holovision and have him say it. Have him repeat it over and over till it's drummed into every person on Trantor—"

"Hey," said Raich, finally catching his breath. "I can't say that on holovision. I can't let my father find out—"

"No, of course not," said Joranum quickly. "We couldn't allow that. We'll just use the words. We'll find some other Dahlite. Someone from each of the sectors, each in his dialect, but always the same burden. I don't want no robot in charge of me and running the Empire."

Namarti said, "And what happens when Demerzel proves he's *not* a robot?"

"Really," said Joranum. "How will he do that? It would be impossible for him to do so. Psychologically impossible. What? The great Demerzel, the power behind the throne, the man who has twitched the strings attached to Cleon I all his years on the throne and those attached to Cleon's father before him. Will he climb down now and whine to the public that he is, too, a human being? That would be almost as destructive to him as *being* a robot. G.D., we have the villain in a no-win situation and we owe it all to this fine young man here."

Raich flushed.

Joranum said, "Raich is your name, isn't it? Once our party is in a position to do so, we won't forget. Dahl will be well-treated and you will have a good position with us. You're going to be Dahl's section-leader some day, Raich, and you're not going to regret you've done this. Are you, now?"

"Not on your life," said Raich, fervently.

"In that case, we'll see you get back to your father. You let him know that we intend him no harm, that we value him greatly. You can tell him you found that out in any way you please. And if you find out anything else you think we might be able to use—about psychohistory, in particular, you let us know."

"You bet. But do you mean it when you say you'll see to it that Dahl gets some breaks?"

"Absolutely. Equality of sectors, my boy. Equality of worlds. We'll have a new Empire with all the old villainies of privilege and inequality wiped out."

And Raich nodded his head vigorously. "That's what I want."

19.

Cleon I, Emperor of the Galaxy, was walking hurriedly through the arcade that led from his private quarters to the offices of the rather tremendous staff that lived in the various annexes of a palace that served as the nerve center of the Empire.

Several of his personal attachés walked after him with looks of the deepest concern on their faces. The Emperor did not walk to others. He summoned them and they came to him. If he did walk, he never showed signs of haste or emotional trauma. How could he? He was the Emperor and, as such, far more a symbol of all the worlds than a human being.

Yet now, he seemed a human being. He motioned aside those whom he met with an impatient wave of his right hand. In his left hand, he held a gleaming hologram.

"The First Minister," he said, in an almost strangled voice, not at all like the carefully cultivated tones he had painstakingly assumed along with the Throne. "Where is he?"

And all the high functionaries of the State who were in his way fumbled and gasped and found it impossible to manage coherence. He brushed past them angrily, making them all feel, undoubtedly, as though they were living through a waking nightmare.

Finally, he burst into Demerzel's private office, panting slightly, and shouted, literally shouted, *"Demerzel!"*

Demerzel looked up with a trace of surprise and rose smoothly to his feet, for one did not sit in the presence of the Emperor unless specifically invited to. "Sire?" he said.

And the Emperor slammed the hologram down on Demerzel's desk, and said, "What is this? Will you tell me that?"

Demerzel looked at what the Emperor had given him. It was a beautiful hologram, sharp and alive. One could almost hear the little boy—perhaps ten years old—speaking the words that were included in the caption, "I don't want no robot in charge of me and running the Empire."

Demerzel said, quietly, "Sire, I have received this, too."

"And who else has?"

"I am under the impression, Sire, that it is a flier that is being widely spread over Trantor."

"Yes, and do you see the person at whom that brat is looking?" He tapped his Imperial forefinger at it. "Isn't that you?"

"The resemblance is striking, Sire."

"Am I wrong in supposing that the whole intent of this—flier, as you call it, is to accuse you of being a robot?"

"That does seem to be its intention, Sire."

"And stop me if I'm wrong, but aren't robots the legendary mechanical human beings one finds in—in thrillers and children's stories?"

"The Mycogenians have it as an article of faith, Sire, that robots—"

"I'm not interested in the Mycogenians and their articles of faith. Why are they accusing you of being a robot?"

"Merely a metaphorical point, I'm sure, Sire. They wish to portray me as a man of no heart, whose views are the conscienceless calculations of a machine."

"That's too subtle, Demerzel. I'm no fool." He tapped the hologram again. "They're trying to make people believe you are really a robot."

"We can scarcely prevent it, Sire, if people choose to believe that."

"We cannot afford it. It detracts from the dignity of your office. Worse than that, it detracts from the dignity of the Emperor. The implication is that I—*I* would choose as my First Minister a mechanical man. That is impossible to endure. See here, Demerzel; isn't there some law on the books that forbids the denigration of public officers of the Empire?"

"Yes, there are, and quite severe ones, Sire, dating back to the great law codes of Aburamis."

"And to denigrate the Emperor himself is a capital offense, is it not?"

"Death is the punishment, Sire. Yes."

"Well, this not only denigrates you, it denigrates me, and whoever did it should be executed forthwith. It was this Joranum, of course, who is behind it."

"Undoubtedly, Sire, but proving it might be rather difficult."

"Nonsense! I have proof enough! I want an execution."

"The trouble is, Sire, that the laws of denigration are virtually never enforced. Not in this century, certainly."

"And that is why society is becoming so unstable and the Empire is being shaken to its roots. The laws are still on the books, so enforce them."

Demerzel said, "Consider, Sire, if that would be wise. It would make you appear a tyrant and a despot. Your rule has been a most successful one through kindness and mildness—"

"Yes, and you see what it gets me. Let's have them fear me for a change rather than love me—in this fashion!"

"I strongly recommend that you not do so, Sire. It may be a spark that will start a rebellion."

"What would you do, then? Go before the people and say, 'Look at me. I am no robot.' "

"No, Sire, for as you say that would destroy my dignity and, worse yet, yours."

"Then?"

"I am not certain, Sire. I have not yet thought it through."

"Not yet thought it through? —Get in touch with Seldon."

"Sire?"

"What is there that is difficult to understand about my order? Get in touch with Seldon."

"You wish me to summon him to the Palace, Sire?"

"No, there's no time for that. I presume you can set up a sealed communication line between us that cannot be tapped."

"Certainly, Sire."

"Then do so. Now!"

20.

Seldon lacked Demerzel's self-possession, being, as he was, only flesh and blood. The summons to his office and the sudden faint glow and tingle of the scrambler field was indication enough that something unusual was taking place. He had spoken by sealed lines before but never to the full extent of Imperial security.

He expected some government official to clear the way for Demerzel himself. Considering the slowly mounting tumult of the robot flier, he could expect nothing less.

But he did not expect anything more, either, and when the image of the Emperor himself, with the faint glitter of the scramble-field outlining him, stepped into his office (so to speak), Seldon fell back in his seat, mouth open, and could make only ineffectual attempts to rise.

Cleon motioned him impatiently to keep his seat. "You must know what's going on, Seldon."

"Do you mean about the robot flier, Sire?"

"That's exactly what I mean. What's to be done?"

Seldon, despite the permission to remain seated, finally rose. "There's more, Sire. Joranum is organizing rallies all over Trantor on the robot issue. At least that's what I hear on the newscasts."

"It hasn't reached *me* yet. Of course not. Why should the Emperor know what is going on?"

"It is not for the Emperor to be concerned, Sire. I'm sure that the First Minister—"

"The First Minister will do nothing, not even keep me informed. I turn to you and your psychohistory. *Tell me what to do.*"

"Sire?"

"I'm not going to play your game, Seldon. You've been working on psychohistory for eight years. The First Minister tells me I must not take legal action against Joranum. What, then, do I do?"

Seldon stuttered. "S–sire! Nothing!"

"You have nothing to tell me?"

"No, Sire. That is not what I mean. I mean you must do nothing. *Nothing!* The First Minister is quite right if he tells you that you must not take legal action. It will make things worse."

"Very well. What will make things better?"

"For you to do nothing. For the First Minister to do nothing. For the government to allow Joranum to do just as he pleases."

"How will that help?"

And Seldon said, trying to suppress the note of desperation in his voice, "That will soon be seen."

The Emperor seemed to deflate suddenly, as though all the anger and indignation had been drawn out of him. He said, "Ah! I understand! You have the situation well in hand!"

"Sire! I have not said that—"

"You need not say. I have heard enough. You have the situation well in hand, but I want results. I still have the armed forces. They will be loyal and, if it comes to actual disorders, I will not hesitate. But I will give you your chance first."

His image flashed out and Seldon sat there, simply staring at where the image had been.

Ever since the first unhappy moment when he had mentioned psychohistory at the Decennial Congress eight years before, he had had to face the fact that he didn't have what he had incautiously talked about.

All he had was the wild ghost of some thoughts, and what Yugo Amaryl called intuition.

21.

In two days, Joranum had swept Trantor, partly by himself, mostly through his lieutenants. As Seldon muttered to Venabili, it was a campaign that had all the marks of military efficiency. "He was born to be a War Admiral in the old days," he said. "He's wasted on politics."

And Venabili said, "Wasted? At this rate, he's going to make himself First Minister in a week, and, if he wishes, Emperor in two weeks. There are reports that some of the military garrisons are cheering him."

Seldon shook his head. "It will collapse, Dors."

"What? Joranum's party, or the Empire?"

"Joranum's party. The story of the robot has created an instant stir, especially with the effective use of that flier, but a little thought, a little coolness, and the public will see it for the ridiculous accusation it is."

"But, Hari," said Venabili tightly, "You needn't pretend with *me*. It is *not* a ridiculous story. How could Joranum possibly have got on to the fact that Demerzel is a robot?"

"Oh, *that*! Why, Raich told him so."

"Raich!"

"That's right. He did his job perfectly, and got back safely with the promise of being made Dahl's sector-leader someday. Of course, he was believed. I knew he would be."

"You mean you told Raich that Demerzel was a robot, and had him pass on the news to Joranum." Venabili looked utterly horrified.

"No, I couldn't do that. You know I couldn't tell Raich, or anyone, that Demerzel was a robot. I told Raich as firmly as I could that Demerzel was *not* a robot, and even that much was difficult. I spent two days with a splitting headache after that. But I did ask him to tell Joranum that he was. He is under the firm impression that he lied to Joranum."

"But why, Hari? Why?"

"It's not psychohistory, I'll tell you that. Don't you join the Emperor in thinking I'm a magician. I just wanted Joranum to believe that Demerzel was a robot. He's a Mycogenian by birth so he was filled from youth with their tales of robots. Therefore, he was ready to believe and he was convinced that the public would believe with him."

"Well, won't they?"

"Not really. After the initial shock is over, they will realize that it's madcap fiction; or they will think so. I've persuaded Demerzel that he must give a talk by subetheric holovision to be broadcast to key portions of the Empire, and to every point on Trantor. He is to talk about everything but the robot issue. There are enough crises, we all know, to fill such a talk. People will listen, and will hear nothing about robots. Then, at the end, he will be asked about the flier and he need not answer a word. He need only laugh."

"Laugh? I've never known Demerzel to laugh. He almost never smiles."

"This time, Dors, he'll laugh. It is the one thing that no one ever visualizes a robot doing. You've seen robots on holographic fantasies, haven't you? They're always pictured as literal-minded, unemotional, inhuman— That's what people are sure to expect. So Demerzel need merely laugh. And on top of that— Do you remember Sunmaster Fourteen, the religious leader of Mycogen?"

"Of course I do. Literal-minded, unemotional, inhuman. He's never laughed, either."

"And he won't this time. I've done a lot of work on this Joranum matter since I had that little set-to on the college campus. I know Joranum's real name. I know where he was born, who his parents were, where he had his early training, and all of it, with documentary proofs, has gone to Sunmaster Fourteen. I don't think Sunmaster likes Breakaways."

"But I thought you said you don't wish to spark off bigotry."

"I'm not. If I had given the information to the holovision people, I would have, but I've given it to Sunmaster, where, after all, it belongs."

"And he'll start off the bigotry."

"Of course he won't. No one on Trantor would pay any attention to Sunmaster, whatever he might say."

"Then what's the point?"

"Well, that's what we'll see, Dors. I don't have a psychohistorical analysis of the situation. I don't even know if one is possible. I just hope that my judgment is right."

22.

Eto Demerzel laughed.

It was not the first time. He sat there, with Hari Seldon and Dors Venabili in a tap-free room and, every once in a while, at a signal from Hari, he would laugh. Sometimes, he leaned back and laughed uproariously; but Seldon shook his head. "That would never sound convincing."

So Demerzel smiled and then laughed with dignity, and Seldon made a face. "I don't understand it," he said. "Dors laughs with perfect naturalness."

"Not often," said Venabili freezingly. "There's not much to laugh at lately. Or ever, if you don't get psychohistory to some point that satisfies you."

"Which may be never," muttered Seldon, then, to Demerzel. "It's no use trying to tell you funny stories. You get the point only intellectually. You will simply have to memorize the sound."

Venabili said, "Use a holographic laugh-track."

"*No*! That would never be Demerzel. That's a bunch of idiots being paid to yak. It's not what I want. Try again, Demerzel."

Demerzel tried again until Seldon said, "All right, then, memorize that sound and reproduce it when you're asked the question. You've got to look amused. You can't make the sound of laughing, however proficient, with a grave face. Smile a little; just a little. Pull back the corner of your mouth. —Not bad. Can you make your eyes twinkle?"

"What do you mean, twinkle," said Venabili indignantly. "No one makes their eyes twinkle. That's a metaphorical expression."

"No, it's not," said Seldon. "There's the hint of tears in the eye—sadness, joy, surprise, whatever—and the reflection of light from that hint of fluid is what does it."

"Well, do you seriously expect Demerzel to produce tears?"

And Demerzel said, matter-of-factly. "My eyes do produce tears for general cleansing; never in excess. Perhaps, though, if I imagine my eyes to be slightly irritated—"

"Try it," said Seldon. "It can't hurt."

And so it was that when the talk on world-wide holovision was over, and the words were streaking out sub-etherically to millions of worlds at thousands of times the effective speed of light—words that were grave, matter-of-fact, informative, and without rhetorical ardor—and that discussed everything but robots—Demerzel declared himself ready to answer questions.

He did not have to wait long. The very first question was, "Mr. First Minister, are you a robot?"

Demerzel simply stared calmly and let the tension build. Then he smiled, his body shook slightly, and he laughed. It was not a loud, uproarious laugh, but it was a rich one, the laugh of someone enjoying a moment of fantasy. It was infectious. The audience tittered and then laughed with him.

Demerzel waited for that to die down and then said, "Must I really answer that? Is it necessary to do so?" He was still smiling as the screen darkened.

23.

"I'm sure it worked," said Seldon. "Naturally, we don't have a complete overturn at once and instantly. It takes time. But it's moving now in the right direction. I noticed that when I stopped Namarti's talk at the University campus. The audience was with him until I faced him and showed spunk against odds. The audience began to change sides at once."

"Do you think this is an analogous situation?" said Dors Venabili, a little dubiously.

"Of course. If I don't have psychohistory, I can use analogy, and the brains I was born with, I suppose. There was the First Minister, beleaguered on all sides with the accusation, and he faced it down with a smile and a laugh, the most non-robot thing he could have done, so that in itself was an answer to the question. Of course, sympathy began to slide to his side. Nothing would stop that. But that's only the beginning. We have to wait for Sunmaster Fourteen and hear what he has to say."

"Are you confident there, too?"

"Absolutely."

24.

Tennis was not a Heliconian game and Hari Seldon had never played it. He controlled his impatience, therefore, and watched with interest as the Emperor Cleon I, dressed in sports-fashion, loped over the court to return the ball.

It was Imperial tennis, actually, so-called because it was a favorite of Emperors, a version of the game in which a computerized racket was used that could alter its angle slightly with appropriate pressures on the handle. Dors Venabili had once tried to show Seldon how it worked and had even pressed the racket into his hands and had him return a ball. Seldon found it impossible to control.

It clearly took a deal of training.

Cleon placed the ball in a non-returnable position and won the game. He trotted off the court to the careful applause of the functionaries who were watching, and Seldon said to him, "Congratulations, Sire. You played a marvelous game."

Cleon said indifferently, "Do you think so, Seldon? They're all careful to let me win. I get no pleasure out of it."

Seldon said, "In that case, Sire, you might order your opponents to play harder."

"It wouldn't help. They'd be careful to lose anyway. And if they did win, I would get even less pleasure out of losing than out of winning meaninglessly. Being an Emperor has its woes, Seldon. Joranum would have found that out if he had ever succeeded in becoming one."

He disappeared into his private shower facility and emerged in due time, scrubbed and dried and dressed rather more formally.

"And now, Seldon," he said, waving all the others away, "the tennis court is as private a place as we can find and the weather is glorious, so let us not go indoors. I have read the Mycogenian message of this Sunmaster Fourteen. Will it do?"

"Entirely, Sire. As you have read, Joranum was denounced as a renegade Mycogenian and is accused of blasphemy in the strongest terms."

"And does that finish him?"

"It diminishes his importance fatally, Sire. There are few who accept the mad story of the First Minister's robothood now. Furthermore, Joranum is revealed as a liar and a poser, and, worse, one who was caught at it."

"Caught at it, yes," said Cleon, thoughtfully. "You mean that merely to be underhanded is to be sly and that may be admirable, while to be caught is to be stupid and that is never admirable."

"You put it succinctly, Sire."

"Then Joranum is no longer a danger."

"We can't be certain of that, Sire. He may recover even now. He still has an organization, and some of his followers will remain loyal. History yields examples of men and women who have come back after disasters as great as this one, or greater."

"In that case, let us execute him, Seldon."

Seldon shook his head. "That would be inadvisable, Sire. You would not want to create a martyr, or make yourself appear a despot."

Cleon frowned. "Now you sound like Demerzel. Whenever I wished to take forceful action, he would mutter 'despot.' There have been Emperors before me who have taken forceful action and who have been admired as a result and have been considered strong and decisive."

"Undoubtedly, Sire, but we live in troubled times. Nor is execution necessary. You can accomplish your purpose in a way that will make you seem enlightened and benevolent."

"*Seem* enlightened?"

"*Be* enlightened, Sire. I misspoke. To execute Joranum would be to take revenge, which might be regarded as ignoble. As Emperor, however, you have a kindly, even paternal, attitude toward the beliefs of all your people. You make no distinctions, for you are the Emperor of all alike."

"What is it you're saying?"

"I mean, Sire, that Joranum has offended the sensibilities of the Mycogenians and you are horrified at his sacrilege, he having been born one of them. What better can you do but hand Joranum over to the Mycogenians and allow them to dispose of him? You will be applauded for your proper Imperial concern."

"And the Mycogenians will execute him, then?"

"They may, Sire. Their laws against blasphemy are excessively severe. At best, they will imprison him for life at hard labor."

Cleon smiled. "Very good. I get the credit for humanity and tolerance, and they do the dirty work."

"They would, Sire, if you actually handed Joranum over to them. That would, however, still create a martyr."

"Now you've confused me. What would you have me do?"

"Give Joranum the choice. Say that your regard for the welfare of all the people in your Empire urges you to hand him over to the Mycogenians for trial, but that your humanity fears the Mycogenians may be too severe. Therefore, as an alternative, he may choose to be sent to Nishaya, the small and secluded world from which he claimed to have come, there to live a life of obscurity and peace. You'll see to it that he's kept under guard, of course."

"And that will take care of things?"

"Certainly. Joranum would be committing virtual suicide if he chose to be returned to Mycogen and he doesn't strike me as the suicidal type. He will certainly choose Nishaya, and though that is the sensible course of action, it is also an unheroic one. As a refugee in Nishaya, he can scarcely lead any movement designed to take over the Empire. His following is sure to disintegrate. They could follow a martyr with holy zeal, but it would be difficult indeed to follow a coward."

"Astonishing! How did you manage all this, Seldon?" There was a distinct note of admiration in his voice.

Seldon said, "Well, it seemed reasonable to suppose—"

"Never mind," said Cleon, abruptly. "I don't suppose you'll tell me the truth, or that I would understand you if you did, but I'll tell you this much. Demerzel is leaving office. This last crisis has proved too much for him and I agree with him that it is time for him to retire. But I can't do without a First Minister, and, from this moment, you are he."

"*Sire!*" said Seldon in mingled astonishment and horror.

"First Minister," said Cleon calmly. "The Emperor wishes it."

25.

"Don't be alarmed," said Demerzel. "It was my suggestion. I've been here too long and the succession of crises has reached the point where the consideration of the Three Laws paralyzes me. You are the logical successor."

"I am *not* the logical successor," said Seldon hotly. "What do I know about running an Empire? The Emperor is foolish enough to believe that I solved this crisis by psychohistory. Of course, I didn't."

"That doesn't matter, Hari. If he *believes* you have the psychohistorical answer, he will follow you eagerly and that will make you a good First Minister."

"He may follow me straight into destruction."

"I feel that your good sense, or intuition, will keep you on target, with or without psychohistory."

"But what will I do without you—Daneel."

"Thank you for calling me that. I am Demerzel no more, only Daneel. As to what you will do without me— Suppose you try to put into practice some of Joranum's ideas of equality and social justice. He may not have meant them; he may have used them only as ways of capturing allegiance; but they are not bad ideas in themselves. And find ways of having Raich help you in that. He clung to you against his own attraction to Joranum's ideas, and he must feel torn, and half a traitor. Show him he isn't. In addition, you can work all the harder on psychohistory, for the Emperor will be there with you, heart and soul."

"But what will *you* do, Daneel?"

"I have other things in the Galaxy to which I must attend. There is still the Zeroth Law and I must labor for the good of humanity, insofar as I can determine what that might be. And Hari—"

"Yes, Daneel."

"You still have Dors."

Seldon nodded. "I still have Dors." ○

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FROM:

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

by Tom Disch

NOUNS

A Noun's a Thing that has a Name.
Thus, King's a Noun (and so's his Fame).
The Queen's a Noun; so too the Knave—
(Yet Nouns are neither fair nor brave).

You're not a Noun, nor yet am I,
But every Cloud is, in the Sky,
And all our Thoughts (if they are clear)—
But Nouns are never Pronouns, dear.

ADJECTIVES

Without us apples would be gray
And pies would taste like modeling clay;
The nights would go by in a haze,
No darker or brighter than the days.

When we are near, the sky is clear,
The market bullish, stockings sheer.
As jewels on a satin gown
Are adjectives to any noun.

PRONOUNS

This is a pronoun; that is, too,
And so am I, and so are you.
But Pete is not, nor yet is Pat,
And neither are their dog and cat.

We may not make a lot of fuss,
But each and every one of us
Can do the work of any noun
And still have time to fool around.

IF/THEN

If/Then is a wonderful machine.
If you use soap, then you'll be clean.
If you do this, I'll give you that.
A wagging tail will earn a pat.

MAYBE

Maybe works another way:
Maybe might come out and play—
But maybe not, he cannot say.

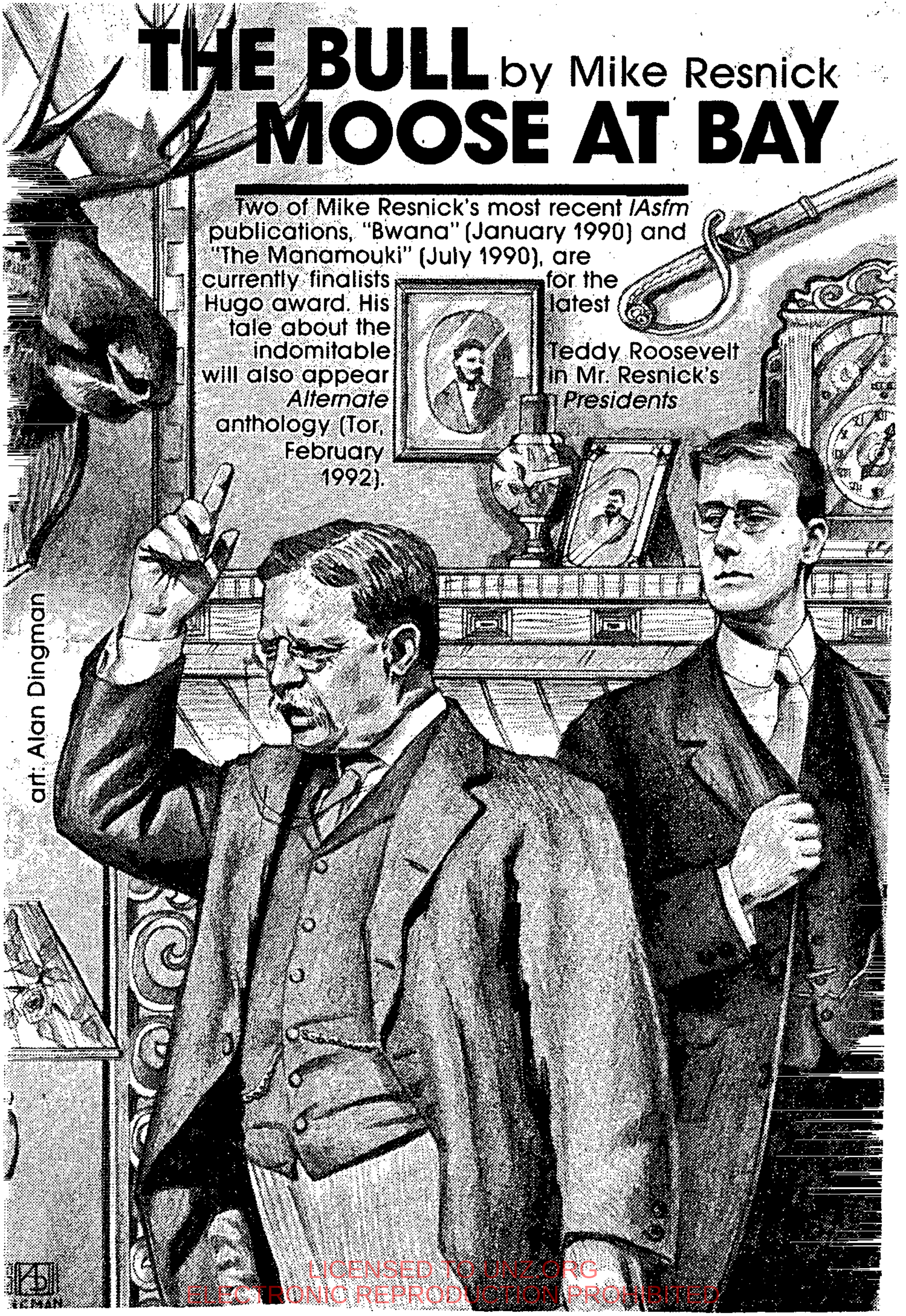
For Maybe's acts are not his own:
His life's a die that's never thrown,
A Phantom jet that's not been flown.

Although he might, he might not, too:
He could be me, he could be you.

THE BULL MOOSE AT BAY

by Mike Resnick

Two of Mike Resnick's most recent *IAsfm* publications, "Bwana" (January 1990) and "The Manamouki" (July 1990), are currently finalists for the Hugo award. His latest tale about the indomitable Teddy Roosevelt will also appear in Mr. Resnick's *Alternate Presidents* anthology (Tor, February 1992).



art: Alan Dingman

I don't care what may be his politics, I don't care what may be his religion, I don't care what may be his color. I don't care who he is. So long as he is honest, he shall be served by me.

—Theodore Roosevelt
Speech at Cooper Union Hall,
New York, N.Y., October 15, 1886

Personally I feel that it is exactly as much a "right" of women as of men to vote. I always favored woman's suffrage, but only tepidly, until my association with women like Jane Addams and Frances Kellor changed me into a zealous instead of a lukewarm adherent to the cause.

—Theodore Roosevelt
Autobiography (1913)

The date was October 27, 1916.

It was a birthday party, but it resembled a wake.

The president had invited only his family and a few close friends to his retreat at Sagamore Hill on this, his fifty-eighth birthday. He walked from room to room in the huge old mansion, greeting them, trying to joke with them, but unable to keep a dark scowl from periodically crossing his face. Even Alice, his oldest child, who had distracted her share of cabinet meetings and press conferences, seemed unable to distract him tonight.

"Well?" demanded the president at last.

"Well, what, Theodore?" asked his wife.

"Why is everyone tiptoeing around me?" he demanded. "I'm not dead yet. There are worse things than taking an enforced vacation." He paused. "Maybe I'll go back to Africa again, or explore that river the Brazilian government has been asking me to map for them."

"What are you talking about, Mr. President?" said Elihu Root. "You're going to spend the next four years in the White House."

"This isn't a political rally, Elihu," answered Roosevelt. "It's a quiet party, and you're among friends." He sighed deeply. "You've seen the papers, you've heard what the pundits say: I'll be lucky to win six states."

"I believe in you, Mr. President," insisted Root.

"You're my Secretary of War," said Roosevelt, managing one of his famous grins. "You're *supposed* to believe in me." The grin vanished, to be replaced by a frown. "I wish I could say the same of the Republican Party."

"They're still angry at you for running and winning as a Bull Moose four years ago," said Edith, standing in front of her husband and stroking his hair lovingly. "Some of them probably wish that fanatic who tried to shoot you in Milwaukee had been a better shot. But when they're faced with a choice between you and Mr. Wilson, they'll do what's right."

Roosevelt shook his head. "If I can't win the Congress to my cause, how can I expect to win the people?" He strode restlessly across the parlor. "The choice isn't between me and Mr. Wilson; if it was that simple, I'd have no fear of the outcome. It's a choice between their principles and their prejudices, and given the splendid example of the Congress"—he spat out the word—"it would appear that their prejudices are going to win, hands down."

"I just can't believe it," said Gifford Pinchot.

"Gifford, you're a good man and a loyal man," said Roosevelt, "and I thank you for the sentiment." He paused. "But you're my Director of National Parks, and trees don't vote. What do you know about it?"

"I know that you came into office as the most popular American since Abraham Lincoln—probably since Jefferson, in fact—and that you managed to win the war with Germany in less than a year. We've become a true world power, the economy's never been stronger, and there aren't any more trusts left to bust. How in God's name can they vote you out of office? I simply refuse to believe the polls."

"Believe them, Gifford," said Roosevelt. "You've got less than three months to find employment elsewhere."

"I've spoken to Hughes, and he thinks you're going to win," persisted Pinchot.

"Charlie Hughes is my running mate. It's in his best interest to believe we're going to win." Roosevelt paused. "That's one thing I'm especially sorry about. Charlie is a good man, and he would have made an excellent president in 1920. A lot better than that fat fool from Ohio," he added, grimacing at the thought of William Howard Taft, who had succeeded him the first time he had left office.

"Speaking of Charlie," said Root, surveying the room, "I don't see him here tonight."

"This is a birthday party, for my friends and my family," answered Roosevelt. "I'm sick of politicians."

"*I'm* a politician, Theodore," said Root.

"And if that's all you were, you wouldn't be here," answered the president.

"What about *him*?" asked Root, nodding toward a tall, well-dressed young man who seemed uncomfortable in his surroundings, and viewed the world through an elegant *pince-nez*.

Roosevelt sighed. "He's family."

"He's also a Democrat."

"At least he's still speaking to me," said Roosevelt. "That's more than I can say for a lot of Republicans."

"He's too busy looking down his nose to speak to anyone," commented Pinchot.

"He's young," answered Roosevelt. "He'll learn. And he's got a good wife to teach him."

A tall, grizzled man clad in buckskins entered the room. Everyone stared at him for a moment, then went back to their drinks and conversations, and he walked across the parlor to where the president was standing.

"'Evening, Teddy," said Frank McCoy.

"Good evening, Frank," said Roosevelt. "I'm glad you could come."

"Brought some of the stuff you asked me to hunt up," said McCoy.

"Oh?"

McCoy nodded and pulled a wrinkled folder out of his rumpled jacket. "Two hundred thousand acres adjoining the Yellowstone, a couple of lakes, nice little river flowing through it, even got some buff and grizzly left, and yours for the asking."

"You don't say?" replied Roosevelt, his eyes alight with interest.

"And I found another one, out by Medora in the Dakota Bad Lands, right near where you used to own a ranch."

"Medora," repeated Roosevelt, a wistful smile crossing his face. "It's been a long time since I've thought of Medora." He paused. "Stick around when the party is over, Frank. I'd like to go over these brochures with you."

"I won't hear of it!" snapped Pinchot. "You're going to be the president of the United States for four more years!"

"So who says the president can't own a ranch out near the Yellowstone?" asked McCoy.

"You should be out campaigning for him, not finding retirement homes," continued Pinchot angrily.

"Gifford, I've always been a realist," said Roosevelt. "I'm going to lose. It's time to start planning the next phase of my life."

"I won't hear of it!" said Pinchot.

"I admire your loyalty, but I question your grasp of politics," said Roosevelt gently. "The people will speak one week from today, and neither you nor I are going to like what they have to say—but we're going to have to abide by it, and I'm going to have to find something to do with myself."

"But you're *right!*" said Pinchot. "Can't they see it?"

"Evidently not," answered Roosevelt.

"If it wasn't for that bastard Morgan . . ." began Root.

"It isn't J. P. Morgan's fault," said Roosevelt. "He's opposed me for years, and I've always beaten him. No, you can lay the blame for this at the doorstep of the Republican Party. They're still bitter that I ran as a Bull Moose and beat Bill Taft—but they're slitting their own throats to have their revenge on me, and I can't seem to make them understand it." He sighed again. "Or maybe it's my own fault."

"You're not backing off what you've been fighting for, are you, Teddy?" asked McCoy, arching a bushy eyebrow.

"No, of course not," answered Roosevelt. "But obviously I didn't get my message across to the people who count—to the voters."

"How could you?" asked Root, taking a drink from a liveried servant as he passed through the room with a large tray. "The Republicans own three-quarters of the newspapers, and the rest think that God speaks directly to Woodrow Wilson."

"I should have realized that it was in their best interest to oppose me and gone out on the stump and spoken to the people directly. I've done it often enough before." The president shook his head. "What I can't understand is why the Democrats didn't grab this issue and wave it like a flag once the Republicans wouldn't have anything to do with it."

Root snorted contemptuously. "Because they're Democrats."

"And maybe they were afraid if they took *it*, they'd have to take *you*, too," added McCoy with an amused grin.

"It could turn their party around," said Roosevelt seriously. He looked across the room at the tall, well-dressed young man who was carefully inserting a cigarette into its holder. "Look at my cousin," he said, lowering his voice. "An effete blue-blooded snob, who dabbles in politics the way some men dabble in stamps and coins. Yet if he came down on the right side of this single issue, he could be in the White House fifteen or twenty years from now."

"God forbid!" laughed Pinchot in mock horror.

"Mark my words," said Roosevelt. "This is an issue that isn't going to go away. You and I may wind up in history's ashcan, but not what we fought for. It's as inevitable as the stars in their courses, and I can't seem to make a single Republican senator or congressman see it!"

An almost animal growl of anger came forth from the president's lips, and Edith immediately approached him, bringing him a soft drink, straightening his tie, smoothing his hair.

"You must try to control yourself, my dear," she said soothingly.

"What for?" demanded Roosevelt. "I thought I was supposed to be among friends tonight, not politicians. If a man can't express disgust for the Congress to his friends, then who *can* he express it to?"

"Please, Theodore," said Edith. "You don't want to make a scene."

"Why not?" he said irritably. "A president has the right to make a scene if he wants to."

Edith shrugged. "He's all yours, gentlemen," she said to Root, McCoy, and Pinchot. "I can't do a thing with him when he's like this."

She walked off to supervise the butler and servants.

"What is everyone staring at?" demanded Roosevelt, for all talk had stopped when Edith had approached him. "Isn't a beaten candidate allowed his tantrums?"

"You're not beaten yet, Father," said Alice.

Roosevelt shook his head impatiently. "Of course I am," he said, addressing the room at large. "But that's not the issue. *I'm* not important. I've put in eleven years at this job. It's time I moved on to other things: I've still got books to write and distant lands to see. The important thing is what's going to happen to the country." The president's voice rose in anger. "You can't simply disenfranchise 60 percent of it and expect things to run as they've always run."

"My cousin, the Samaritan," muttered the tall man with the *pince-nez* and the cigarette holder, and a number of people around him chuckled in amusement.

"Laugh all you want!" thundered Roosevelt. "That's what the Congress did, too. You want to vote me out of office? Go ahead, that's your right—*if* you happen to be a male of the Caucasian race." He glared at them. "Doesn't it bother you that more than half the people in this room *can't* vote me out of office no matter how much they disagree with me?"

"It bothers *me*, Cousin Theodore," said a plain-looking woman who had been standing unobtrusively in a corner, reading some of the framed letters from other heads of state that were displayed on the wall.

"Well, it ought to bother *all* of you," said Roosevelt. "How can we build a country based on the principle that all men are created equal, and then refuse to give women the vote? We freed the slaves more than half a century ago—and we've erected so many barriers that more Negroes voted *before* the Civil War than vote now!" He paused. "How can I be president of all the people when six out of every ten of them can't vote for me or against me?"

"I believe we've heard this song before," said one of the guests, a one-time hunting companion from the Rockies.

"Well, *I* don't believe you've heard a word of it!" snapped Roosevelt. "What makes someone an American, anyway?"

"I don't think I understand you," said the hunter.

"You heard me—what makes you an American?"

"I . . . ah . . ."

"You were born here and you're breathing!" said Roosevelt. "Does anyone know of any other qualification?" He glared pugnaciously around the room. "All right, now. What do you think makes you better than any other American?"

"I consider that an insulting question, Mr. President."

"You'd consider it a lot more insulting if you were a woman, or a Negro, or an immigrant who received his citizenship papers but can't pass a literacy test at the polls—a test that nine out of ten college graduates couldn't pass!"

Roosevelt paused for breath. "Don't any of you understand? We're not living in a Utopia here. We haven't reached a plateau of excellence from which we will never budge. America is a living, growing experiment in democracy, and sooner or later, whether you like it or not, women *are* going to get the vote, and Negroes are *not* going to be harassed at the polls, and immigrants are going to be *welcomed* into a political party."

"If it's inevitable, why are you so worked up about it?" asked a distant relative. "Why did you let it cost you the presidency?"

"He hasn't lost anything!" snarled a younger man. "Those are fighting words! Step outside and—"

"He's right," interrupted Roosevelt. "It did cost me the election."

"But Mr. President—"

"That's a fact," continued Roosevelt. "And facts can be many things, pleasant and unpleasant, but the one thing they always are is true."

"Then I repeat—why did you let it cost you the presidency?"

"Because I believe in the principles of the Republican Party," answered Roosevelt.

"The Republicans voted almost ten-to-one against your proposals, and it took you six ballots to win the nomination once you decided to merge your Bull Moose party with them," continued the man. "What makes you think this has anything to do with the Republican Party?"

"Please!" said Edith, coming back into the parlor. "We didn't invite you here to fight. This is supposed to be a birthday party."

"It's all right, Edith," said Roosevelt. "It's a fair question; it deserves an answer." He turned to his questioner. "I believe in the Republican Party," he said, "and I tell you that the party will rise or fall on this single issue. It's as simple as that."

"How can you say such a thing?" demanded the man incredulously.

"How can you not see it?" retorted Roosevelt. "How can *they* not see it, those fools in the Congress? It's only a matter of a few years, a decade at most, before women get the vote, before we stop harassing our minorities at the polls. Can't anyone else see that the party that fights most vigorously for their rights will count them among their numbers? Can't anyone else understand that an influx of voters greater than the number that already exist will totally change the balance of political power in this country?" He paused, and his chin jutted out pugnaciously. "No matter what you think, I haven't been waging this war for myself—though I pity the man who has to tell my Alice that she can't vote for her father on election day. I'm waging it because it's the right thing to do, whether I win or lose—and because if the Republicans don't realize what the future holds, then sooner or later the Democrats will, and we will permanently become the nation's minority party."

"Calm yourself, Theodore," said Root, laying a hand on his shoulder. "We can't have the president dying of a stroke a week before the election."

Roosevelt jumped at the touch of Root's hand, then blinked his eyes rapidly, as if suddenly realizing his surroundings. "I'm sorry, Elihu," he said. "The election is all but over, and here I am, still campaigning."

"It's an issue worth campaigning for," said the plain-looking woman.

"The problem is that nobody who agrees with me is allowed to vote for me," said Roosevelt with a wry smile.

"That's not so, Theodore," said Pinchot. "*I* agree with you."

"And I," added Root.

"Me, too, Teddy," said McCoy. "You know that."

"That's probably why none of you hold elected office," remarked the president with dry irony.

The party continued for another three hours, as still more relatives and old friends stopped by to pay their respects, and to see Roosevelt one last time while he was still the president of the United States. Politicians and Rough Riders, New York dandies and Indian chiefs, men of letters and men of action, black men and white, women of all political stripes, mingled and rubbed shoulders in the Sagamore Hill mansion, for the president had made many friends in his fifty-eight years. Even F. C. Selous had taken time off from a safari to cross the Atlantic and celebrate his most famous client's birthday. Roosevelt, for his part, was soon so busy greeting guests that there were no more outbursts.

At ten o'clock Edith had the servants bring out a case of champagne, which everyone except the president imbibed. Then came the cake, and a chorus of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," and then, one by one, the guests began departing.

By midnight only a handful of people remained: Root, McCoy, Selous, two grizzled old Rough Riders, and the plain-looking woman.

"I see your husband's left without you again," noted Roosevelt.

"He had business to conduct," replied the woman. "Politicians are just the opposite of flowers: they don't bloom until the sun goes down."

Roosevelt chuckled. "You always did have a fine wit."

"Thank you."

"I'll never know what perverse whim caused you to marry a Democrat," he continued, "but I suppose he's no worse than most and probably better than some. Grow him out and I imagine he'll turn out all right."

"I plan to, Cousin Theodore." She paused. "By the way, I fully agree with what you said before. The party that reaches out to the disenfranchised will dominate the next half century of American politics."

"I'm glad *someone* was listening," said Roosevelt.

"Listening and taking notes." She smiled. "Well, mental notes, anyway."

"How about your husband?" said Roosevelt. "I've never asked before—but what's *his* position on enfranchisement?"

"The same as yours."

"Really?" said Roosevelt, suddenly interested. "I didn't know that."

"He doesn't know it, either," answered the plain-looking woman, "but he will when I get through speaking to him."

Roosevelt grinned. "You're a remarkable woman, Cousin Eleanor."

She smiled back at him. "Why, thank you, Cousin Theodore."

"Play your cards right and you may be the second First Lady named Roosevelt."

"I plan to," she assured him.●

FROM:
A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

VERBS

Supposing a verb Could Verbalize
The essence of its verbal being,
This Is what a verb Would Do:
It Would Rise
Like bread dough full of yeast;
It Would Fall
Like dew; it Would Sail like the moon
Across night skies; it Would Call
Like a loon, and wolves Would Reply.
It Would Fly,
It Would Dance,
It Would Flaunt,
It Would Frown,
But it *never* Would Think of Becoming a noun.
It Would Sneer at the thought of Being Pinned down
Like a man who Has never Left his home town
To Feel the turbulent ebb and flow
As cities' millions Come and Go.
No active verb Can Stand to Stand still.
It Must Have action, Feel the thrill
Of Using all its verbal skill
To Sink and Swim and Think vast thoughts
And Tie itself in tangled knots.

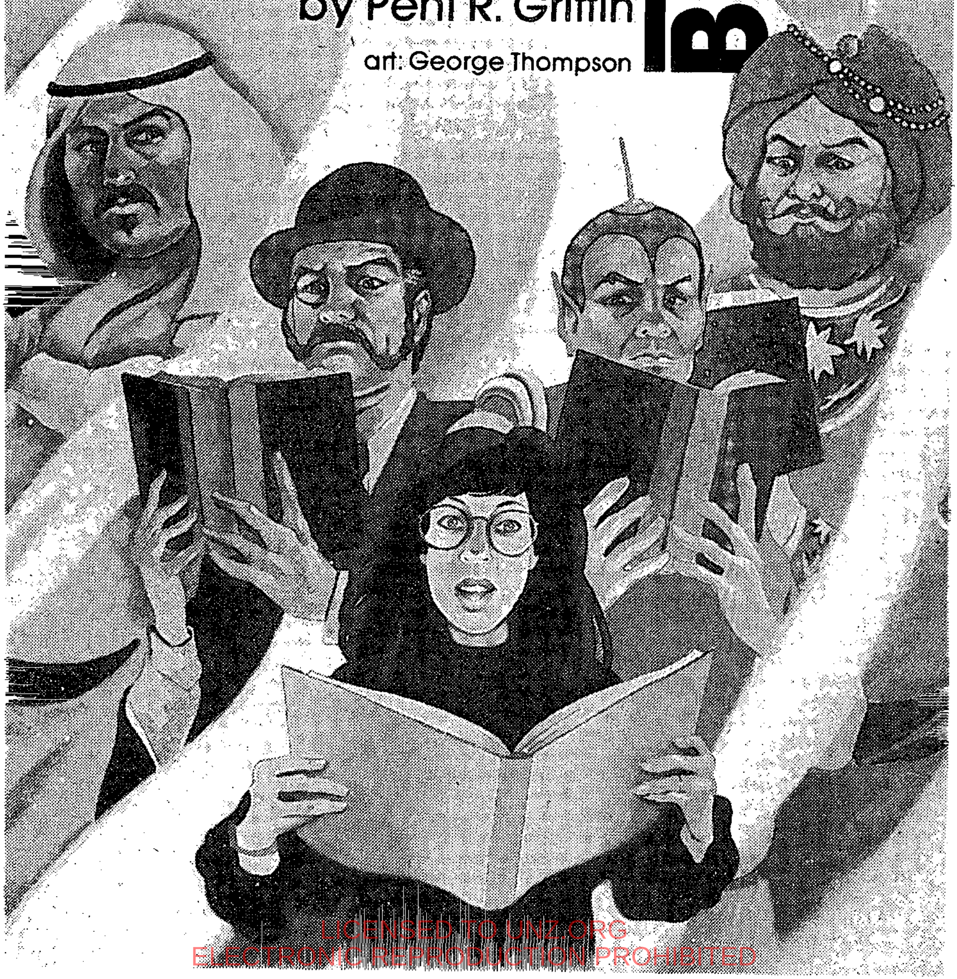
—Tom Disch

BOOKS

"Books" is the author's second tale for *IAsfm*. Her first, "The Goat Man," appeared in our May 1989 issue. Since then, she's had stories published in *Space and Time*, *Pandora*, and *F&SF*, and her juvenile fantasy novel, *Otto from Otherwhere* (Macmillan) was published in April 1990. Ms. Griffin is currently at work on a second children's book and an adult time-travel novel.

by Peni R. Griffin

art: George Thompson



Susie staggered into my hospital room toward the end of visiting hours with her hands low and her head high, a double stack of paperbacks balanced between. "Hi," she said. "I thought maybe you might like something to read." She eased her haul onto the floor by my bed, so that the top few were in easy reach.

I thrust three chocolate boxes at her. "You're a saint. Take these before I eat them."

Susie sat down to pick out all the cremes and eat them with impunity. When she showers, puddles form in her collarbones. Her clothes never seem to fit, no matter how carefully I help her shop. Her hair flies around her head like brown spiderwebs, too fine to do anything with. She keeps her eyes tucked away behind thick, thick glasses, and never appears to focus them on anything.

I looked over the first few books in the stack. *Murder at the Vicarage. Flowers for the Judge. The Fountain Pen Mystery. Easy to Kill.* The smell of used paperback rose like incense in the sterile hospital atmosphere. My enforced roommate's TV babbled and thundered. Susie and I talked about school, about the necessity of her finding someone else to share her apartment this semester, about cooking potatoes. The previous night, I discovered, she had tried to boil potatoes without putting water in the pot. I asked her for my Walkman, to shut out the TV.

Visiting hours ended more quickly than she expected—she had, as usual, been late. As soon as she left I dove into the blessed stack. I hadn't read anything not posted on a wall since my accident, and my brain was starving. *Flowers for the Judge* was a good story, though with a largely irrelevant title. Without pausing for breath I went straight into *The Fountain Pen Mystery,* which, according to the blurb, was "Harriet Vane's" (whose?) "classic mystery; With an Afterword describing the Wilvercombe case." Whatever.

I'm not a devoted mystery fan, just a steady casual reader, so it wasn't surprising that I hadn't heard of Harriet Vane. Despite the dull title, she had produced a good puzzle mystery, literate, and with some claim to real characterization. The Afterword made me feel that I ought to be more familiar with the name, though. She had been involved in a notorious murder trial, as the defendant, in the late twenties; and afterwards did some real-life detecting, the promised "Wilvercombe case," in company with a titled detective whom she later married. Lord Peter Wimsey—dammit, I was sure I'd seen that name before! Still, I had too many books to read to puzzle over this one. I got all the way through *Color Scheme* before the nurse made me go to bed, and the moment I woke up I reached for the next in the stack.

I started reading *Gaudy Night* over my tray of recycled eggs and oatmeal. I'd been a little afraid of tackling Dorothy L. Sayers up to now, because she was reputed to be a real writer instead of a hack; and, as an English major, I read so many real writers that I want hacks when I relax. However, I'd be stuck here too long for a steady diet of intellectual junk food, and here the book was.

Escapist literature read at speed fades quickly from my consciousness, and my head was thick with painkillers, so my slight feeling of recognition did not crystallize until the first textual mention of Lord Peter Wimsey. I stopped, stared at the name, and set aside my fork to reach for *The Fountain Pen Mystery*. Harriet Vane. Lord Peter Wimsey. A search of the indicia revealed no signs of the hoax. I would have to ask Susie where she'd gotten this.

Reading furiously, I finished *Gaudy Night* shortly before visiting hours. When I closed it, I was breathless and dazed, as if the top of my head had been removed. For the first time, Dame Agatha had to make room for someone at the top of the mystery heap.

Now that I knew so much about Harriet, the pastiche book was even more interesting. Again, more thoroughly, I searched it for clues, but the author had been dedicatedly self-effacing. The copyright boggled me. Surely you couldn't hold a copyright under an assumed name? If she had gone to the lengths of legally adopting it, would she have stopped with one book?

Susie brought my Walkman that day, but no tapes. My own fault for not asking specifically. "I'm sorry," she said, in that vague manner which is next door to no apology at all. "I forgot. I'll bring you some next time."

Normally I would have asked her what she expected me to do with a Walkman and no tapes, but I had more pressing interests just now. "Speaking of next time," I said, picking up *The Fountain Pen Mystery*, "where'd you get this?"

"Brock's," said Susie, producing an impossible answer with assurance. Brock's used to be a used bookstore of remarkable proportions. The basement had a yellowed cardboard sign tacked over the stairwell, warning customers that books beyond that point had not been priced since fourteen years before the sign went up. When space grew too short, the proprietor just shoved boxes of books onto the sidewalk, free for the taking. At least, he had, before he had a stroke and decided he couldn't handle the business anymore.

"Brock's has been closed for a couple of years now, Sue," I said, patiently.

"Has it? It looked open to me."

"You must've mixed it up with Donaldson's or Half-Price," I suggested, naming some other good sources of ratty paperbacks.

"I did not." She got that stubborn set to her mouth. "Brock's is the downtown one, right? A couple blocks from here?"

"Yes, but it's empty. Don't you remember going and picking up as many bargains as we could during their going-out-of-business sale?"

Susie frowned. "I guess so. Somebody else must've taken it over, then, because I got all these there."

That was at least possible. "Did you see any other books by Harriet Vane?"

"I might have. They were all mixed up together."

"I want you to find me some more. Everything by this person, and by Dorothy L. Sayers. Don't bankrupt yourself or anything," I warned, knowing how hopeless she was with money. "I don't have to have all of them right away. And I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

"That's okay. Paperbacks are only fifty cents apiece."

"Nobody sells all paperbacks at fifty cents."

"I was there and you weren't. They're only fifty cents."

After a certain point, it's best to give Susie her head. Sooner or later she'll bang it against reality, look dazed for a minute, and start over, none the worse. I changed the subject, and told her about the Harriet Vane book. It took her a little while to get straight. "So Dorothy L. Sayers was writing about a real person?"

"No, dear. This will turn out to be some fan of Sayers who sat down and wrote a book and put Harriet Vane's name on it. For a joke. She did a real thorough job of it, too. This whole book is printed up just like it was the real thing, and it's the twenty-seventh printing. Or says it is."

"Neat," said Susie.

Time hurried without, and dragged within, as my bones knitted and winter faded gradually into the boundless Texas spring. I was restless and irritable, saved chiefly by the interest of Susie's visits—always bearing books. I chafed to get out of bed and visit her mysterious bookstore for myself, though Susie certainly did her best by me. She brought a dozen more Harriet Vanes, all the Peter Wimsey books, and some Ariadne Olivers. You may remember that Ariadne Oliver was Agatha Christie's fictional surrogate, an untidy, apple-eating author of sensation novels. The books under her name were almost as good as Christie's own; but the real author was as elusive as "Harriet Vane."

Pumping the bookstore owner through Susie proved both frustrating and pointless, since Susie lacks both curiosity and common sense, those prime tools of the researcher. "Jules doesn't care if the authors are real or not," she said. "He's getting tired of my asking."

"Who's Jules?"

"I told you. The old man behind the counter. He says Harriet Vane's just as real as Dorothy L. Sayers and can write books if she wants to."

"That's not helpful."

"What difference does it make? Maybe you only thought those people were made up. Real people get put into books all the time."

"Not without libel suits or acknowledgements," I said. "It's just an elaborate hoax—like *The Princess Bride*, only more thorough."

"What hoax?" asked Susie.

"Oh, God," I moaned. "Susie, you've got the book. Take it out and look at it. It's by William Goldman."

"It's abridged by William Goldman. It's by S. Morgenstern."

"S. Morgenstern is imaginary. Trust me. William Goldman's abridgement is all there is."

"It is not! I've got an unabridged copy."

I didn't know what to think of that, except that I knew better than to accept Susie's word. "You've got it mixed up somewhere," I said. "Bring it next time and let me look at it."

"You'll see," she sniffed haughtily.

I don't know if you've read *The Princess Bride*. It's a tale of true love and high adventure surrounded by a frame story, in which the author tells all about his father reading this wonderful, exciting book to him. When he grew up, he learned that the author, S. Morgenstern, had not set out to write an adventure story. His father had made it into one by picking out the good parts from a morass of sociopolitical satire on S. Morgenstern's home country, Florin. Of course, there is no country called Florin, and no S. Morgenstern. The only version you'll ever see is Goldman's "good parts version."

The book Susie handed me next day had a plain blue binding, badly-worn, with white letters almost rubbed off the spine. The pages were gray and soft-edged. The Florinese-American Society and S. Morgenstern had copyrighted and published it in 1942, in accordance with wartime paper restrictions. It looked old. It felt old. It even smelled old.

Susie pointed to the table of contents. "See? Unabridged."

Sure enough, the chapter about the queen of Florin packing to visit the queen of Guilder was in there. So was all the missing stuff about gathering the material for the Resurrection Pill; and miles of omitted parenthetical remarks about Morgenstern's wife. William Goldman's name was invisible. The effort that must have gone into this forgery was mindboggling, and I couldn't see the point. No one was that dedicated a fan! I looked up at Susie suspiciously. "How much did you pay for this?"

She wiggled. "Uh—a lot."

"How much?"

"Fifty dollars. But I had to have it!"

"That's ridiculous!"

"It is not! You know I'll never see another one! I—"

"No, no, no! Fifty dollars is cheap for this! Way too cheap!"

She blinked at me.

"Making it look old must've cost more than that. And can you imagine the work involved in writing an acceptable pastiche? There'd be no profit in forging this and selling it for fifty dollars."

"Then it can't be a forgery, can it?"

I lay back with a groan.

"You want me to call the nurse?"

"I'm fine. I feel better every day. I just don't understand where the books you bring me are coming from. I don't understand how you can pay a measly fifty dollars for a book like that. I don't understand why the Sayers biography you brought me doesn't mention this Harriet Vane imposter, and I don't understand why this Jules person of yours doesn't know anything about the books he's selling. There must be something that you're overlooking."

"I'll take you to see for yourself just as soon as you get out," she said plaintively.

Poor Susie—she'd done everything in her power to make my hospital stay pleasanter. "Well," I said, deliberately reining myself in, "it's not like there's nothing I can do. Could you bring me some paper and my portable typewriter, so I can write to the publishing companies? They've got to know something."

Most of the books were at least five years old, and the companies had had plenty of time to undergo name changes, mergers, and other transformations. I phoned the information desk in our library and found a sympathetic librarian, who went to a lot of trouble and supplied me with most of what I needed. While waiting for answers, I read yet more, pushed myself in physical therapy, and began mentally outlining a thesis on the subject of fan authors.

The publishers replied unsatisfactorily after long lapses of time. With all the information I'd given them, not one had an employee willing or able to track down the real authors. Some of them denied that they had ever printed such books; none told me what I wanted to know.

At last one day I walked out of the hospital, on my own two feet, and stood blinking at the sunlight. The Zeusian faces in the upper corners of the entryway frowned down at me, and I smiled back. Gladly I breathed in air untainted by antiseptic—just sunlight, traffic, river water, and warm cement. Longing to be on my own again, I had deliberately lied about my release date, and no one came to pick me up. I'd had Susie take home all but one or two books, and was setting out into the world burdened only with my overnight case.

The San Antonio River, green and spangled, beckoned to me, but I walked straight past the steps toward Commerce Street. Half a block brought me in sight of the red brick building I wanted, squeezed between a bank and a lunch counter, with its dead neon sign announcing succinctly, "Books." I walked faster, despite uncertain knees. Sunlight glared off the show windows, rendering them opaque. I waited at the corner for the walk sign. Glorious anticipation swelled in me as I hurried down the sidewalk—and collapsed as I stood before empty, dusty windows, still bearing patiently their burden of sale information.

"Damn you, Susie," I muttered. "How could you stay confused so long?"

No point spoiling my day. I laid my disappointment firmly aside, and went in pursuit of the second thing I had promised myself—a cinnamon ice cream cone on the River.

Susie was satisfactorily surprised when I showed up, weary and triumphant, at our apartment some hours later. She was desultorily studying a CPR booklet on the couch, and leapt to her feet with a cry when she realized who was walking in on her. "I thought—you said—"

"I lied," I said, hugging her before switching off the light and opening the curtains. "Why are you using electricity when the sun's so bright out? I bet our utility bill is sky-high." I collapsed into a bean bag chair, stretched my feet out, and relaxed all over. "It's good to be home."

I watched Susie drift around the apartment fixing supper, and listened to her chatter, determined to keep my mind off unpleasant subjects; but the worries kept intruding. Susie had never found a satisfactory replacement roommate to cover my half of the rent. Hospital bills stretched interminably before me. I had totaled my car, and Susie had had to sell hers. Summer semester would cost so much. If Susie got a lifeguarding job (and why would anybody do anything so dangerous as to hire her? I'd tried to talk her into another line of summer work, but she held fast to this idea, for some reason), it would bring in this much, while living expenses would come to this other amount. Susie had clearly lived off rice and canned soup since Christmas; I would have to see she started eating right again. I finally had to attack her about the store, just to get my mind off money.

"It beats me how you can get lost over a distance of a block and a half," I said.

"What? What did I do now?"

"Brock's is still empty."

"It is not! I was there just last week!"

"It was empty today. That's the first place I went."

"Then you got mixed up."

"I'm not the one who gets lost on the way to the grocery store."

"I only did that once—well, a couple of times. Look, I know I'm right. I'll prove it to you tomorrow."

In fact it was three days later, what with one thing and another, that we took the number nine bus downtown. Susie led me confidently through the maze of streets, sidewalks, and river entrances. I followed with equal confidence, for she wasn't taking the plain and simple route any person of sense would to get to Brock's. I knew Susie wasn't a person of sense; but I never thought that her nonsense could extend as far as it did.

After a few unnecessary twists and turns we emerged from the river level shops on Commerce, and she headed me back toward Navarro. "See?" she said, triumphantly pointing at the sign. "Right there."

"But it's empty—" I began, and stopped. Once again the dusty windows displayed dusty books—not the encyclopedias and Texana that had been Mr. Brock's showpieces, but intriguing ranks of worn, gilt-edged tomes; colorful boxes of paperbacks; and bewildering stacks of novels and textbooks.

"It beats me how you can get lost over a distance of a block and a half," said Susie with pardonable smugness.

"It was empty," I said. The aroma of musty old books came out to meet us. "I stood right here and saw an empty store."

"Maybe it was hiding from you."

Our entrance touched off a jangle of tiny brass bells. The interior was oddly unfamiliar, but the essential feature of wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling, books remained. A man like a chamois rag left balled in the sun to dry blinked over a book behind the counter. Rear windows I did not recognize laid dusty fingers of sunlight on the ranks of books behind him. He looked up, eyes red-rimmed, and smiled. "Bonjour, ma chère!" he croaked, as if his body could hold just enough air for life, with nothing left over for speech. "Is this your friend of the hospital?"

"She got out three days ago," said Susie. "She says she came here and couldn't find you."

"I did," I said. "Where were you?"

"That's not the question," he said. His eyes were rather like Susie's—opaque, kindly eyes that looked without seeing—or, at any rate, without seeing the same things others in the same vicinity saw. "The question is, where can you go?"

"This is Jules," said Susie. "I told him all about you."

I wasn't sure, from the way he looked at me, that this was a good thing; but faint heart never won fair author, so I questioned him about the Vane/Oliver/Morgenstern mystery. Jules waved away my curiosity with a random Gallic hand. "What matter where they come from, Mademoiselle? You have the books."

"But I don't have the authors."

"The authors are irrelevant."

"Where did you get them?"

"People bring them. We buy, sell, and trade."

Eventually I gave up and went to search the stacks myself. The confusion was incredible. Not one book in ten was even in English. Beautiful, thick-paged books in ideograph—Japanese or Chinese, I couldn't say—rubbed shoulders with battered editions of Nancy Drew; Hindu Kama Sutra with German Perry Rhodan; an Arabic math text with a Latin *Winnie-the-Pooh*. "How do you find anything here?" I asked Susie.

"How do you not find things here?" she responded, not lifting her nose from a book on Disney animation.

Ranks of paperbacks had accumulated near the back windows, and I set off to explore them. No doubt my head was still weak from the hospital, for the world of my peripheral vision seemed warped and elongated, but as long as I kept my eyes firmly fixed on my goal and walked straight towards it, I could reach it without serious discomfort or disorientation. I thought I had worked out the source of the general sensation of unfamiliarity. Jules must have removed some interior partitions, making one huge crowded room out of two or three smaller ones. The windows would provide a view of a courtyard I had been in once or twice, where an enormous tomcat presided over a goldfish-stocked fountain. Lightheaded, I stopped to take a breath and look out—onto a sunlit alley, lined with the backs of half-timbered houses.

My mouth went dry, and my knees shook. I remembered that courtyard distinctly, and in any case there are no half-timbered houses in downtown San Antonio. I collapsed onto a box of Harlequin Romances, and gazed up the length of the store to the display windows. I should have seen the recently-renovated, brilliantly frilly Staacke Building across the street, and modern Americans of English and Mexican descent passing and repassing; instead, we were opposite a mosque, and men and women in more or less unWestern robes walked by without a curious glance. The display windows, seen from behind, were broader than from in front, rimmed with leaded glass, and improbably far away.

"Susie," I croaked. My voice failed to carry. "Susie!" Jules did not look up from *Claudine*; Susie stuck her finger in the volume of poetry she was looking at and came over.

"Find something?"

I shook my head helplessly.

Her eyes nearly focused on my face. "Are you okay?"

Again I shook my head, and pointed at the display window.

Rain poured down on a dim and unfamiliar street, where figures scurried by beneath umbrellas. "That's funny; it wasn't raining a minute ago," said Susie; then looked down at the sunlight lying across her arms, and frowned.

The bells jingled as a man in a spattered black robe and mortarboard entered, carefully shaking his umbrella. "Good morning, Jules," he said, in a voice comprehensible only because we had seen so many Monty Python episodes. "Pestilential weather!"

"You have a miserable climate," agreed Jules.

Susie looked out the back window at a broad vista of red tile roofs, leading down to a gray horizon stretched across startingly blue water. "I wonder why I never noticed any of this before."

"Because you never notice things." The problem had sorted itself out in the back of my brain while I sat stunned. "You've been coming to an interdimensional bookstore for three months."

Susie absorbed and assimilated this without difficulty. "That explains everything."

"But what's going to explain that?"

"What difference does it make?" Her face shone. "You know, I bet all the books ever written anywhere are here!"

"There's not enough room."

"How do you know?"

She had me there.

A young man in a Mao jacket, with thick rimless glasses, emerged from the basement carrying a stack of books and reading the top one. He made his way to the counter, where he and Jules conducted their business in what I suppose to have been Mandarin Chinese. Susie was smiling dreamily. "Wouldn't you just love to have a summer job here?"

"No openings," said Jules over his shoulder. "Only one dealer at a time."

The Chinese man departed, still reading, into what I hope was a street in his home town. I stood up, new vistas opening before my mind's eye even as the view from the rear window changed into a green yard where cherry trees bloomed above a stone wall. "Have you realized that this solves our problem?"

"What problem?"

"Our money problem."

"Oh. You know, we could do the most amazing research for papers here."

"Susie. Listen." I took her shoulders and made her look me in the eye. "We take books we know don't exist where we come from, okay? Things like *The Fountain Pen Mystery*. And we copy them. And we sell them to publishers. And we make money, because these are proven bestsellers—plenty enough money to finish school and pay off the hospital and eat decent meals." The sudden cessation of sunlight interrupted me; I glanced up at rows of plastic igloos under a cold, dead sky, a geodesic dome like a huge chickenwire fence above us. I shivered and continued. "And then by the time we get out of school we'll already have reputations.

We can go on and do whatever we want to and whatever happens, we'll have the income from those books."

Susie thought a minute, the wheels visibly turning behind her lenses. "But that would be plagiarism."

"Technically, yes. But nobody'll be the worse for it, and we'll be a lot better."

"I don't know—"

"I do. Trust me."

"Jules wouldn't like it."

"Why should he care? He thinks authors are irrelevant."

"Well—let me think about it."

I knew she'd follow in my wake if I chugged ahead, so I left it at that and began methodically searching for appropriate and interesting books. I wondered if it might be possible to find Sherlock Holmes's monograph on cigarette ash, or on the human ear—the market for that would be smallish, but reliable. The mass of books I had to wade through to find anything specifically useful was intimidating, but I already had enough Vanes and Olivers to set me up for awhile. I began the query letter in my head.

Scenes flashed past the windows—no two alike; exotic, mundane, and incomprehensible by turns. Customers came in and out, each expressing intense absence of mind with every movement, whether dressed in saris or spacesuits. I wondered how many of them realized the nature of this place; how many had been wandering obliviously in and out for years. My case of the shakes was past, and I was rapidly adjusting—though, as the event proved, not rapidly enough.

I began to be tired and hungry, so we took our selections to the counter. A slender man with pointed ears and a slightly greenish cast to his skin wrangled with Jules in an unfamiliar tongue over a couple of huge, odoriferous volumes. The customer was calm, but insistent; Jules, on the other hand, gesticulated wildly and jabbered with the full force of his Frenchness.

"That's funny. Jules is usually pretty easy on pricing," said Susie. "I wonder what that guy's problem is."

Those books were more than musty; they smelled as if the pages had begun to rot. I tried to make out the faded gilt letters down the back, and read the name D'Erlette. "I don't think it's the price," I said. "I think he just doesn't want to sell the books. I bet that's the *Cultes des Goules*, and probably the other is something equally nasty."

"The what?"

"Didn't you ever read Lovecraft?"

"Uh—I don't think so. He's the one with all the tentacly monsters, isn't he?"

"Close enough. The *Cultes des Goules* is a grimoire of forbidden knowledge. People who read it usually go mad or something."

"Oh. I'm surprised Jules would stock something like that."

"He may not have much option. We don't know what the rules are."

Jules stood up on the rungs of his high stool and put his face next to the customer's, jabbing an emphatic wrinkled finger at his nose. An impassive reply only infuriated the dealer more. As his voice rose in yet shriller vociferation, I turned to study the snowy landscape beyond the display window, where dark androgynous figures shuffled to and fro. "How do we get home from here, Susie?"

"I don't know. I always just left." She watched the progress of the dispute with benign, unself-conscious curiosity. "You know—I never wondered before. Jules knows the language of everybody that comes in here. Before when I heard him talking not-English, I just assumed it was Spanish, but that's not Spanish, there. I wonder how he learned it."

"Maybe he taught himself off customers and out of books. Or maybe he's immortal and—"

Jules's tirade choked in mid-syllable, arrested by some inward convulsion. His face flushed nearly purple; his right hand seized his left arm; he slid off the stool and out of sight behind the counter.

We all stood stupidly blinking; then the part of my mind that saved my life in the accident dragged my body into action. "Susie!" I snapped. "CPR! You've been studying CPR! Use it!"

She shook herself, and climbed over the counter. I ran past the stranger's blank gaze, past the familiar glass door, into the familiar sunny street, calling: "Heart attack!"

More blank faces met me, so I crossed against the light, ran into the emergency clinic on the first floor of the hospital, leaned panting against the nurse's window, and threw my message in her face. "Heart attack. Old man. In Brock's."

"Brock?"

"The old book store. On Commerce. My roommate's giving him CPR."

My legs were boneless under me. I let the rapid routine of an emergency call rattle around me, my brain whirling in darkness as my mouth answered routine questions. I was too soon out of the hospital for this. Nonetheless, I walked on my own power to the scene as soon as my vision cleared. The ambulance was there, paramedics and a crowd in front of a locked and empty store.

I stood, staring through the dusty glass at an empty room as the paramedics berated me for playing practical jokes. The door rattled in my hands. "Susie?" I called, hoping my voice would pierce the dimensional barriers. "Susie, come out of there!"

It occurred to me that if I didn't lie down, I would fall; which on pavement would be painful. Accordingly I lay down.

That was a week ago. Now there are more doctor bills; in fact, I have narrowly escaped psychiatric care. Susie is nowhere to be found. If she were going to emerge from behind that door in Commerce Street, I expect she would have done it by now. I have written the story out like this, to put the facts in order, and the effort has not quite been vain.

The hallucination theory, pressed on me so fervidly from all sides, will not hold water so long as I possess books by Harriet Vane, Ariadne Oliver, and S. Morgenstern. Thus I may, with confidence, dismiss all suggestions that we were attacked (in downtown San Antonio in broad daylight with no witnesses!) or suffered some other trauma too dreadful for me to face, for which my subconscious provided this substitute. No; I left Susie doing CPR on an old man in an interdimensional bookstore, and now I can't get back to her.

I suppose intense absence of mind is the entrance ticket to the place, and I may return someday if I ever find someone, like Susie, capable of leaving reality without noticing it. Meanwhile, I am here and she is—where?

My hypothesis is that Jules died, and Susie took over the store. What benefits or responsibilities this position might carry, beyond unlimited access to unlimited books, I can only speculate. Perhaps it was the best thing for her. The notion of Susie going out and earning her own living has always been more or less absurd. She may be happy and useful there, in a way she never could in her native dimension. At any rate, I can hope so.

As for me—nothing hinders me from putting my plan into action with the books in my possession, and the need for money is worse than ever before. I may or may not have overestimated public reaction, in my first enthusiasm for the plan, but it is a gamble worth a few weeks of typing. Only—every time I sit down to start, I am interrupted by the thought, "Susie wouldn't like it."

A silly scruple. I could have converted her, if she'd come out with me—but she didn't.

And it really would be dishonest.

And I'll never see Susie again. ●

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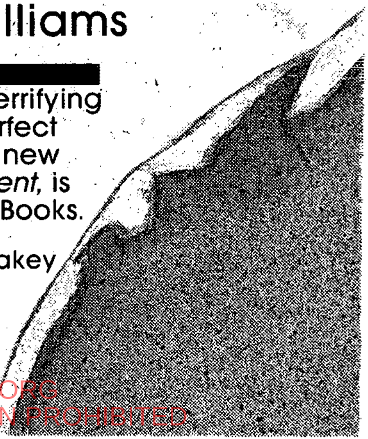
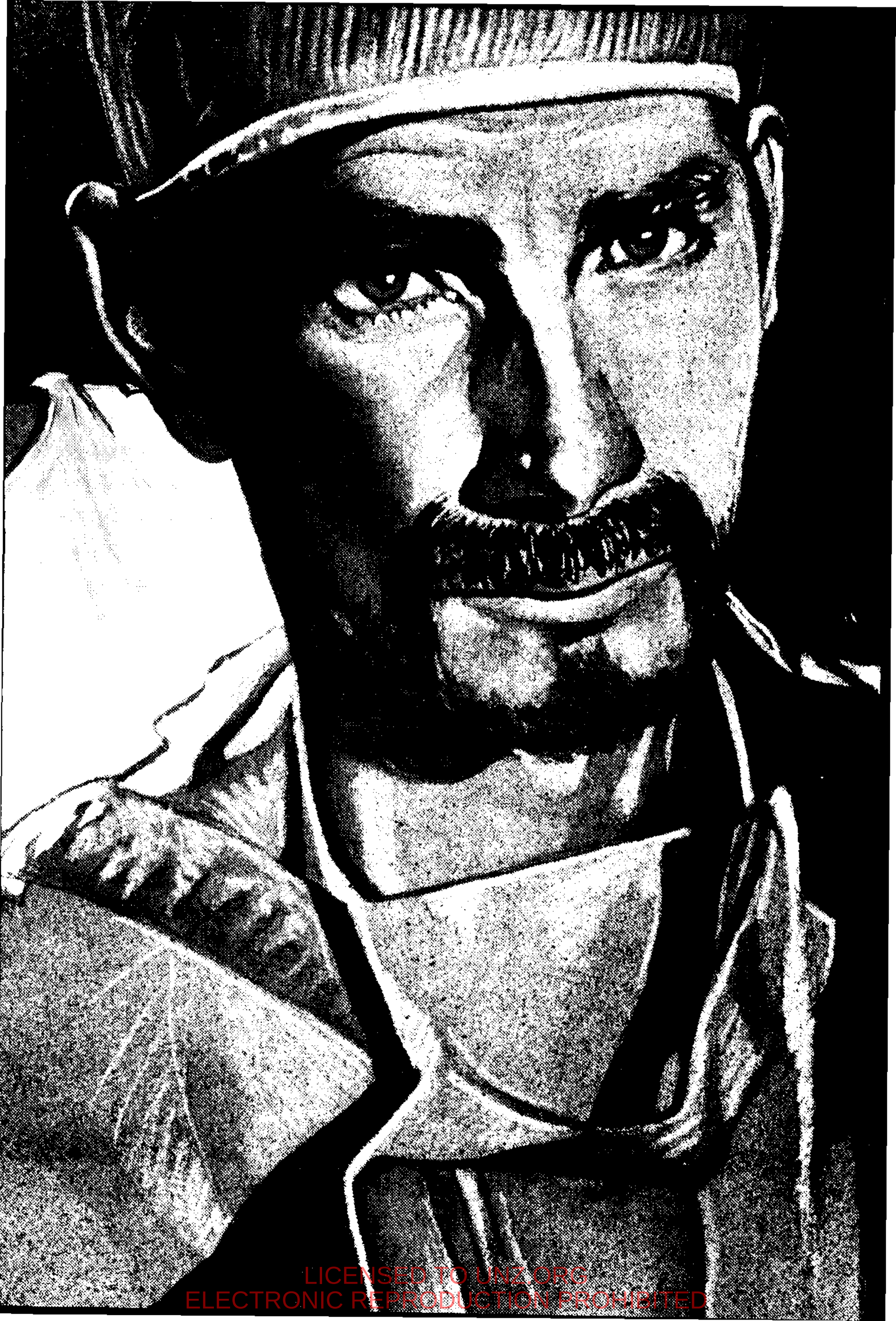
EROGENOSCAPE

by Walter Jon Williams

Some people will go to terrifying lengths to own the perfect body . . . Mr. Williams's new novel, *Days of Atonement*, is now available from Tor Books.

art: Laura Lakey





Smoke rises from Babette's left breast as Dr. Talbot's cauterizing laser strikes home. Collagen and elastin evaporate beneath the precise assault of coherent photons, reveal yellow layers of fat. The laser ceases to pulse, rotates to a new position, fires again. Blood hisses and gives off steam. There is a greasy odor as fat burns away. To Talbot's sensitive nose drifts the scent of blood, of disinfectant.

The blood flow subsides as the laser cauterizes damaged blood vessels. Talbot carefully excavates mammary tissue, then pauses. This is his fourth rehearsal of the operation to reduce Babette's submammary fold, and his action, when the real thing comes, will betray no such equivocation. He pauses not because of uncertainty, but because of a new idea.

Once the idea takes form, Talbot acts upon it without hesitation. All that is called for is a slightly different gelplast implant. His movements are exact. He finishes the left breast, then alters the right along similar lines.

Once the edges of the wounds are glued back together, Talbot adjusts his opaque black sleep mask to a more comfortable position and alters the *t* index. He watches as the two breasts heal, wounds drain, scar tissue forms. He adjusts the mask again and evaporates the scars with precise bursts of his laser. Then he gazes carefully at his work.

Because he was entering via the underside of each breast, both breasts had been pulled upward on Babette's chest wall. He reaches out, draws each breast to a normal position. Body warmth osmoses through his surgical gloves.

He walks around the operating table, studying the result. He makes several recordings of the appearance of each breast, measures the angle of the underside, then sits the patient up to observe the effects of gravity. He repeats his photographs and measurements.

His mouth is slightly dry. His pulse is slightly elevated. He believes he has done very well.

He stands and takes a few free breaths. Babette, he is sure, will be pleased.

Talbot reaches out to throw a mental switch, and his patient fades away.

Talbot's sixty-foot motorboat rocks to another gust of wind. Talbot sips gasless mineral water in the saloon and gazes at his wife's smiling features, broadcast via satellite from Tahiti and materialized in his optic centers. The Pacific sun, he observes, is bringing out her freckles.

"The Borodins have been very nice," she says. "Trudi and I go out every day."

"Please give them my best," Talbot says.

His first wife, Natalie, had been a fellow medical student who also hoped to make her name in body design—the marriage had failed, Talbot thought, because they were too much alike, because they shared too many obsessions. In contrast, he and Sarai have little in common and the marriage seems a success.

It was her scapulae that had first attracted him. He first saw them here on Montserrat, as Sarai walked the black volcanic beach and played toes-tag with the ever-rising ocean. Her back was to him, and, as he watched, a shiver ran through him at the extraordinary freedom of her shoulder blades beneath her supple skin—they moved with rare independence, creating a striking play of skin and shadow. It was almost as if her scapulae were the pinions of developing wings. He knew he had to make their acquaintance.

He introduced himself and offered to buy her a drink. Her body was petite, with breasts so small he could fit them into a martini glass without deforming them. The label on her bikini bottom had cost her trust fund the equivalent of two months' work on the part of the average Earth laborer. Her bones were good, her hair was dark, her eyes needed work. He found out she was a college student on vacation. She explained to him her strategy for avoiding worry lines and cellulite. He praised her scapulae and she seemed to believe him. He told her he was rich and could make her beautiful. She believed that, too.

Talbot worked on the eyes and nose and mouth, the ears and pectorals and breasts and hips. He altered the cheekbones and jawline, improved the curve of the buttocks and the line of the calf. He restructured the eye sockets so that they wouldn't get puffy in freefall and so that she'd look her best on her shopping binges on L4. He tattooed her inner wrists with his signature so that everyone would know who designed her. He gave her money and let her flaunt his signature, his design, in every fashionable resort in the Earth System. It was wonderful advertising.

He left her scapulae reverently alone.

He'd overheard people say that their relationship was shallow. Ridiculous. It was based on the fact they both worshipped, absolutely adored, her body. What could be more profound than that?

Besides, if he ever tired of her, he could simply change her into someone else. It would be simple enough.

"I see you're getting a few freckles," he says.

There is a half-second's pause, due to the lagtime of the satellite link, and then Sarai turns doubtful. "Should I get out of the sun, do you think?"

"I think they look attractive."

Sarai is cheered, at least after the half-second lag. There is a glow in her grey Optrim™ implants.

"But I wouldn't overdo it," Talbot cautions.

She promises to be careful of the sun. She blows a kiss at him over the interface link.

"I love you," she says.

"I love you, too."

The image fades from Talbot's mind. Babette's is already there to replace it.

Mr. Alexandru is Babette's agent in her dealings with Dr. Talbot. His hair and eyebrows are unnaturally black, and he affects a pencil-thin mustache and a smoked monocle. The visible eye is an Optikon Seven, color Soulful Brown™. Alexandru is tanned and his short hair is parted within a millimeter of the center line. He is perhaps sixty, but looks no older than twenty-five. His cosmetic surgery is very good, and if Alexandru hadn't favored a deliberately artificial style, with projecting brow ridges and cheekbones, the work would have been undetectable.

The boat shudders to a williwaw flooding down from the slot in Montserrat's volcano. Because of the potential for oversdroppers, Alexandru prefers not to use the interface for his visits with Dr. Talbot, and instead visits Talbot on his yacht.

"In the matter of the femoral triangle and groin," Alexandru says. "Babette would like to see the workups on those as soon as possible."

"Naturally. I've only done some exploration in that direction, but I think I'm prepared to discuss my ideas."

"By all means. Do you have a simulation prepared?"

Talbot smiles. "Shall we face in?"

With his long, artistic surgeon's fingers, Talbot slides the interface studs into his head sockets. Ceramic and gold contacts snug into place. He closes his eyes, pulses codes to the onboard computer, and Babette's groin blossoms before his visual cortex, set against a contrasting of neutral charcoal grey.

"There are two points at issue," Talbot says. "First, the femoral triangle, specifically the two deep grooves at the juncture of hip and thigh, the first between the sartorius and the adductor longus, the second between the sartorius and tensor fascia lata."

"Quite." Alexandru's purring voice reaches Talbot both over the short distance between them and over the face, creating a distracting stereo effect.

"Though the pleasant shading caused by the interplay of muscle in the inner thigh can be accentuated merely by developing the muscles themselves, Babette has indicated that she wishes the sartorius to be made more prominent in order to emphasize the grooves on either side. This can be accomplished by dissecting the muscles upward and attaching a Plianon implant to the femur." Talbot triggers the computer simulation, showing different stages of the operation; the muscles lift gently outward with teflon-cushioned hooks, the implant nestles in its new location. "Plianon is far more frictionless than bone and the muscle will slide over it in a natural way. The result—" Moving the simulation to its conclusion. "—should be a sartorius provocative in its display of suppleness and shadow, but without the conclusive appearance of an artifact." Babette's simulation begins moving through slow-motion knee bends. Shadow plays over flexing skin, pantherlike muscle. The point of view remains fixed at groin level.

"Very good, doctor." Even through the face Talbot can sense Alexandru's intense interest. "May I have a copy of this?"

"Of course."

"With your lecture included?"

"I'm recording it."

"Very good. Now—the second problem you mentioned?"

"Ah. The line of Babette's groin." Babette's simulation freezes its movement in a squatting position, knees apart, feet flat on the floor. Talbot materializes an image of his own hand, finger pointing, as a visual aid. "You'll note the series of curves displayed in the outline, three on each side of the center line. The longest and flattest is the gracilis, which is the superficial muscle on the underside of the thigh. As it stretches all the way from the shaft of the tibia to the anterior half of the pubic arch—in other words from below the knee to the pubic area itself—it is best defined in this squatting position." Talbot's own hand, his real hand, moves in tandem with its simulation as the latter slides along the underside of the simulated thigh. Illusory tactile contact and warmth, artifacts of the simulation, trickle along the pads of his fingers. He had found the tactile programming to be insufficient and had programmed this piece himself. "I personally feel that there is no need for artificial augmentation of this feature," he says. "It's quite prominent on its own."

"I'll make a note of it."

"The second curve," the simulated hand arcing, "is behind the first, and basically consists of the fatty lower curves of the buttocks as seen from the front. As we are going to lift the buttocks in another operation, this curve will diminish." The simulation does so. "If Babette feels that the natural dropcurve is attractive, we can add subdermal pads to enhance it. The operation is very simple and can be done at the same time as the buttock lift."

"I see."

"Do you have any idea of Babette's wishes in this matter?"

"My suspicion is that she will want to retain that curve, or something like it."

"I'll make preparations then and run simulates on a variety of subdermal pads."

"Thank you. I'll pick them up on my next visit."

"The third curve," the hand making a delicate cup below the groin, "is the projection of the labia majora."

"Not sufficient," Alexandru says. "Babette is not well-endowed in this respect." Talbot can sense his frown.

"I rather thought the groin was not prominent enough."

"At present Babette has subdermal pads in her labia."

"The problem with an implant in the labium majus is that it is rather artificial to the touch. In an intimate situation it can be . . . off-putting." Talbot resists the impulse to wiggle his fingers below Babette's pubis.

"Babette has not mentioned this," Alexandru murmurs.

"Perhaps she has been lucky in her choice of partners," Talbot says. "Nevertheless, we can avoid the issue entirely by fixing Plianon implants to the ischial tuberosities—the bony projections at the bottom of the pelvis." Babette's skeletal structure fluoresces briefly beneath its skin to illustrate the point. Little flashing arrows point out the area in question. "This should project the labia downward," the simulation illustrating this, "and create a more provocative curve. The size of the pads and degree of projection is of course up to Babette."

"Thank you, doctor." Alexandru's voice is brisk. Talbot, eyes closed to fully enter the interface, can sense his yacht moving uneasily, caught between current and the wind pouring through Montserrat's volcano.

"One more point, before you face out."

"Yes?"

"In the matter of the breast implants . . ."

"I thought they had already been decided."

"Quite so. But during a recent rehearsal of the operation I noticed something. If I may . . . ?"

Alexandru is impatient. "Very well."

The simulation shifts to contrasting recordings of Babette's breasts, the side view. One is the result of Talbot's last simulated operation, the other of an earlier attempt.

"As you see," Talbot explains, "the submammary fold is eliminated in both cases. But this second pad is slightly fuller along the bottom—you see?" His hand traces the curve. "I find this outcurve somewhat more pleasing, though of course it's a matter of opinion. I think Babette might want to look at this view before committing herself one way or another."

"Ye-es." Intrigued. "I see what you mean." Alexandru turns brisk again. "I'll show this view to Babette. The final decision, of course, will be hers."

"Of course."

"Shall we face out?"

Talbot unfaces, opens his eyes, turns to Alexandru. His mouth feels dry and Talbot is aware that the palm of the hand that had guided the simulation is moist. He rubs his hands together, then pops a liquid crystal data cube from his onboard comp, takes it in his long fingers, and hands it to Alexandru. "Here is my analysis. May I offer you a drink? Coffee? Tea?"

Alexandru has a gin and tonic. Talbot pours himself gasless mineral water. Alexandru adjusts his monocle, gives Talbot a frown.

"Any problem with security?" he asks. "Any hints of people sniffing around?"

"None. My private security here is the best available, and as I know the Prime Minister socially I can call on state forces at any time. She is aware of how many benefits the clinic brings to her," he smiles, "beleaguered island. With the rising water reducing her living space, she's happy for any source of income."

"When Babette's body is brought here," Alexandru says, "there will be problems. I will guarantee it. Some people will do *anything* to acquire a simulation of the body, with or without its modifications. Some may attempt to take the body itself."

The boat tugs at its mooring buoy. Talbot sips, smiles. "My practice caters almost exclusively to celebrities. There's never been a leak. *Never.*"

"With all respect, doctor. Babette is different. If the screamsheets ever have *any* idea her body is here . . ."

"I've laid on extra security. And my own precautions have been in place for some time."

The glance through Alexandru's monocle is sharp. "I merely wish to emphasize that unusual pressures may be brought to bear."

Talbot holds out his glass of mineral water. Despite the movement of the boat, despite the extension of his arm, there isn't even a tremor in the surface of the water.

"I'm used to pressure," he says. "In fact I thrive on it."

Triumph sings through Talbot as he looks down at the new simulation of Babette's body. Alexandru had brought it to him that afternoon, along with the news that Babette had agreed to his suggestion concerning the lower curve of her breast.

The simulations with which Talbot has been working up till now are not current. They are an early type, cruder than he is used to—the internal organs not Babette's, but taken from a generic surgical simulation, then sized and wrapped in Babette's image. They are old—thirty years old in some cases—created before Babette's first cosmetic surgery.

But this simulation is current, taken with the latest scanning technology. This one is Babette and only Babette, down to the subcellular level.

She stretches out before him on the table, the body young, unscarred, its face slack, gaze blank, flesh unmarked by the knife. Pliable. Not yet the superstar that dominates the screamsheets but a full-grown embryo, a blank slate for Talbot's scalpel.

Talbot will help form this icon, this marvel, this figure of worship. He can feel power surge through his hands as he gazes down at Babette's body.

Babette. A name, a body, a face . . . an industry. The most stunning media figure of the last two generations. Ranked with other legendary divinities like Harlow, West, Monroe, Bardot, Taylor. . . .

No one had thought it possible any more to develop an icon with such universal resonance. Humanity stretches from the half-submerged venices of Florida to the asteroid belt, embracing ever-diverging tastes and cultures—no one figure, it was reasoned, could dominate the preferences of a system-wide audience.

Babette had managed it. She started out, age fifteen or so, as a slit-eyed, dimpled porn actress from the slums of Ste.-Foy, her body already lush—hormone treatments were suggested. Her stance was cool, cynical, thoroughly knowing—provocative in someone her age—but still she seemed, despite the coolness, resonant with inadvertent passion. Amid the slack glances and hesitant delivery of her contemporaries, Babette stood out. Her subsequent history was to demonstrate that her ability to imagine herself was already fully-formed. As the parts in which she was cast evolved from mediocre porn to high-budget porn to provocative comedy, from comedy to music video to sophisticated drama, the cool pose faded away, and, as she grew older, Babette managed to discover in herself a kind of innocence, a wide-eyed wonder that even the sordid facts of her biography had not been able to extinguish. (Screamsheet fodder, this: her father was unknown, her mother an alcoholic and the victim of a serial killer; her foster parents had sold her to her first pimp for two hundred in worthless Quebecois scrip.)

Volumes had been written about the purity this strange Magdalen managed to project. It was the innocence that proved more enduring than the earlier worldly-wise pose, an innocence that somehow embraced, absorbed, the earlier quality of knowing, without sacrificing its own simple artlessness. Babette knew what was what, saw the world as it was, and still lived in a kind of hope.

As the roles matured, so did Babette's body. Fashions in bodies change, from lush to neurasthenic and back again. Babette's was in the classic mode of the goddesses before her—perhaps it is a constant, Talbot thinks, some feature of human character, that goddesses need to be ample. No one ever accused Marilyn Monroe of being skinny: no one ever thought it hampered her career much, either.

Babette was one of the first to flaunt her augmentations. Others had cosmetic surgery and acknowledged it when forced to: Babette boasted of it—she helped to popularize the term "body design"—and dared her audience to work out just what she'd had done. Her fans complied: the earlier pornography—Babette had long since acquired the rights—sold by the millions so that a careful measured examination could be made of every altered feature. Babette's modifications tend to be daring: she will push her body to the brink of artificiality, but not beyond. An overly-sculpted, overly-radical look would be too subject to changes in fashion: Babette aims for a provocative, ample universality—and she achieves it.

Babette has been a gigastar for almost forty years. Her every move is chronicled with relentless diligence and mind-stretching comprehensiveness by the media. She has achieved the heights for which she aimed, a parity with the legends of the past.

But now she is aiming to surpass them.

Mae West and Jean Harlow, Liz Taylor and Brigitte Bardot . . . all are dead.

Babette, with Talbot's help, will never die.

Now that the new simulation has arrived, Talbot's rehearsals begin in earnest. He brings in two assistants, Cummings and Baca-Torrijos. It is only necessary to add an anaesthesiologist to complete the team, but she won't be necessary until Babette's physical body finally arrives.

Talbot chooses his assistants based not only on skill but on nerve. Some people get apprehensive around laser surgical tools, and the usual remedy is to cover everyone in the operating room, assistants, doctor, and anywhere on the patient not to be cut, with sopping wet towels or soaked surgical gear, while everyone in the room wears protective goggles. All to prevent accidents from happening on the chance the laser is pointed the wrong way when it's turned on.

Talbot won't have it. His use of the cauterizing laser is absolutely precise, absolutely correct, and he will not have it implied otherwise. If his assistants aren't willing to place trust in him—the same trust placed in him by the patients, he points out—then they are welcome to seek employment elsewhere.

Baca-Torrijos has been an assistant for four years now. Cummings, however, is new; she has yet to accustom herself to his ways. Even now, he notices, even in simulation when it isn't powered, she flinches a bit when the laser deploys toward its target. The nervousness seems to increase, rather than diminish, with each rehearsal.

Talbot rehearses his team meticulously on each operation. Breast reshaping, sublabial implants, buttock lift, the replacement of the eyes with Kikuyu™ implants, the reshaping of the eyelids and configuration of the eye socket for zero-gee, the reduction of the nasal septum, the maxilla and replacement of the alar cartridge, that arches winglike over each nostril, with a natural-seeming implant just a bit more flared.

The transformation is something that Babette herself has willed. Her grasp of possibility, of surgical technique, is breathtaking.

The resulting artifact, even in simulation, is astonishing. The pupal Babette becomes, step by step, a goddess.

And then Talbot discovers that someone has profaned the shrine.

He asks Cummings to meet him in his office. Two of his security detail, complete with sidearms, wait outside.

Voltaic apprehension twitches through her body as she steps through the door. The security people have her spooked. Her face (cheekbone implants, reshaped jaw, pad at the point of the chin) turns away as he looks at her.

No wonder she was nervous in rehearsal. She was planning *this.*

Talbot steeples his long fingers in front of him. "A lengthy transmission was recorded on our main computer this morning," he says. "Do you know the transmission I refer to?"

Cummings' lips (augmented with CollaTrine™) are pressed furiously together. She manages to unclamp them long enough to say No.

"Ah." His eyes (Optrim, Radiant Sky Blue™) bore into hers. "The computer has standing instructions to refer any long transmissions to me." He gives a thin smile. "I looked at this one. It was a complete record of Babette's body, complete with a full log of all our rehearsals."

"Someone—" She stammers. "Someone must have—"

"*Someone* jocked her way into the main computer by altering her system account status from a limited account to that of superuser. I and our real sysop were surprised to discover that this was even possible—I'm supposed to be the only superuser on the system. Our intruder used her high level of access to secretly duplicate our every rehearsal of Babette's operation. It was only when the extraordinarily long transmission was logged that a hardwired alarm was triggered." He leans forward, gazes at her. "The intruder didn't know about the alarm, because it wasn't a part of the programming, it was something I personally hardwired into the system. It overrode the command structure and halted the transmission. Recorded it instead, for evidence." Cummings stares at him. "You see," Talbot went on, "when I established this place, I knew there were dangers. People who would want recordings of their favorite people. And . . . I took precautions. Sensibly, it would seem."

"Why," licking her lips, "why are you talking to me?"

"The superuser was *you*."

Her answer comes much too quickly. "It could have been someone who got my account number and passwords."

"And who was also using the terminal in your office? That's on record, too."

"I want a lawyer."

Talbot gives a snort of contempt. "If you insist. But if you'll review your contract, you'll find that it covers this contingency. There's not much room for a lawyer to negotiate." Talbot opens a drawer, produces a duplicate of the contract, pushes it across the desk. "This doesn't have to go to court, you know," he says. "Local justice is . . . well, *primitive* is the wrong expression, quite misleading. I'd say it's just deprived—not much money for coddling felons. And the Prime Minister is a friend, which will doubtless influence the trial."

Cummings gnaws her lip. "Can I have a cigarette?"

"No. You may not." Talbot steeples his fingertips again: it's a gesture he enjoys ever since he'd had the fingerbones lengthened with new lightweight spaceborn alloy in order to provide the long artistic fingers everyone seemed to feel a surgeon required.

"Here's what I'm offering. You tell me who hired you, and if he's on the island we'll have him deported. You surrender the money you've been paid—that's in your contract, by the by. And you agree that the two gentlemen outside—" pointing toward the door, "—will escort you onto an aircraft that will take you to another island, one of the smaller Grenadines that isn't underwater yet, where you will be held incommunicado until Babette's operation is completed. You will agree not to *ever* speak publicly on the topic of Babette's alterations or the designs of any of our other patients. In return, we won't pull your license—you won't be able to work for any major body designers, but no doubt you'll be able to find employment in some pathetic little clinic, somewhere in some miserable corner of the world, to help wanted criminals acquire new faces and thus avoid the law." He takes another piece of paper from his drawer and pushes it across the desk. "Sign here."

Cummings reads carefully and signs. He takes the paper and puts it back in his desk, then looks up at her.

"How much were you paid?"

Cummings thinks for a moment, then takes a deep breath. "Eighty-five thousand shares of Tempel Pharmaceuticals," she says. "I was supposed to get another eighty-five thousand when I delivered the data."

Tempel Pharmaceuticals. Pure blue chip, more stable than any Terran currency other than maybe the Swiss franc. Their weightless orbital factory was producing new products almost every week. To Cummings the stock was worth ten years' salary at what Talbot was paying her. Talbot smiles at her. "Very good. That jibes with what my investigators turned up in your portfolio. I would really have hated it if you hadn't mentioned all that stock."

She looks at him stonily.

"Your employer obviously has a lot of money to spend. Who is he?"

"The name I got was Godolphin. No first name. He's a big blond guy, talks with some kind of accent. Not Brit exactly, but something like."

"And he approached you?"

"On my day off. I took my bike out for a drive and topped by Candy Jack's lounge on the way back. He—" She shrugs. "I thought he was a tourist. Then he started talking investments, like he had something special for me."

"Apparently he did."

Cummings says nothing.

"I suppose it should fall within the category of a bad tip." Distaste curls Talbot's lip. "Did he specifically ask for Babette's program, or just anyone's?"

"He wanted Babette. He wasn't interested in our other patients."

Talbot reaches for the phone. "You'll give my associates a thorough description. If you'll go with the gentlemen outside, I'll make a phone call to the Prime Minister."

Talbot enters the operating theater. Paranoia swims in his brain, and he can taste the metallic bitterness of Cummings's betrayal on his tongue.

He has hired additional security. Alexandru has been informed and is flying to the Grenadines to take charge of the traitor.

No Godolphin, or anyone approaching his description, has been found on the island. Talbot wonders if he is not the only one to benefit from a special relationship with the head of government.

He has spent the last three hours studded into the face, playing *Conspiracy XVII*. The game—if it *is* a game, and not something with greater, if hidden, purpose—is a version of a standard political/economic world simulation developed to assist academics and government officials to make decisions. The designers of *Conspiracy XVII* took the original program and altered a few of the parameters—where the original program presupposes a morally neutral universe, the background of the game is sinister and malevolent. Conspiracies and cabals revolve about hidden power centers, their actions visible only at a distance, through the third-hand actions of cat's-paws who themselves know little of the purposes behind their orders.

Talbot has lived many lives within the murky, sinister framework of

Conspiracy XVII. Usually he dies, the victim of an unknown hand, within hours of beginning play.

Lately, though, he has begun to do better. He has discovered in himself a morbidly ingenious talent for survival, for piecing together clues and making sense of them. He knows, or thinks he knows, that the conspiracy with which he is engaged is descended from the Paulician heretics who were suppressed by the Byzantines, who had extended their original hatred of Emperor Basil to a universal craving for power. Talbot believes he has traced the untoward events by which they gained, then lost, power in modern Italy, and by which they gained supremacy in the Low Countries, the United Kingdom, and Mexico. Careful note of dead American presidents has been taken, and the hagiography of assassination assembled. Some things, however, are unresolved. Was it their hand seen in the destruction of the first Mitsubishi Lagrange Habitat, or that of the Red Gang of Shanghai? Or are the two one and the same? And is the newly-formed Orbital Council, the self-governing body for all Earth's artificial satellites and their inhabitants, a part of their scheme, or somehow a setback?

Touch not the cat. One of his clues, delivered by a dying man in a hospital in the Sudan. *Nemo me impune lacessit*, a graffito found on a crumbling wall in wartorn Kiev. The Latin, he has discovered, is the motto of the Order of the Thistle. He suspects his investigations will soon take on a Scotian cast.

Talbot wonders who it is, exactly, behind *Conspiracy XVII*? Is it merely a game? Or has someone constructed this world-model with a more devious intent? Political/economical simulations have been given an ideological caste before. To whom, he wonders, would it be of advantage for large numbers of people to start thinking of Earth's immediate environment as an interlocking set of orbiting conspiracies?

As he enters the operating room, his mind is alert, its edges keen and sharp, as if it had been carefully honed. Godolphin, he thinks, doesn't know who he's dealing with.

Familiar operating-room smells rise around him. He looks at the table, the empty trays for instruments, the defibrillator waiting for an emergency, the laser scalpel coiled overhead.

He puts on his opaque mask and studs into the face, calls up the simulation of Babette. Her body appears before him: altered, glorious, glowing with life, radiant with celebrity.

The image fails in its usual soothing effect. Talbot puts on a pair of gloves and steps to the table. Babette's sweet breath, oil of cloves, comes to his nostrils. He had added that little touch to the programming himself. He touches the warm, elastic skin. Heat rises through the gloves.

This is what Godolphin is after. It isn't only political/economic simulations that can be used for purposes other than that for which they were designed—this work, too, can have its function twisted.

Some people worship Babette. Some hate her. Some worship and hate her at once.

Some simply want to hold Babette in their arms. With the simulation and the right cyber-sexual implants they can experience full intercourse. Some, amateur surgeons or body designers, want to make improvements.

Some just want to cut her to bits.

The simulation will permit all that. The basic programming was done by perfectly sober doctors as a training aide for surgeons, little aware that versions of the program would be marketed under names like *Anatomical Seduction, Target for Tonight*, or *Serial Killer*. The program's designers had intended the simulation to realistically reflect the use of a scalpel blade on the virtual body, but that implied as well the impact of a butcher knife or a double-bitted axe.

Celebrities, according to the World Court, possess full physiognomic rights—each owns her own appearance, up to and including the viscera. Few are willing to license their appearance for a product called *Razor Rape*.

The black market in celebrity simulations is worldwide. Many simulations offered are merely standard simulations with the celebrity's face and body grafted onto it, but these seem only to have whetted the demand for the real thing. Since cosmetic surgery—or full body design—is an almost inevitable consequence, and often prerequisite, of celebrity, there is an ongoing attempt to corrupt the staff of clinics and hospitals worldwide. That is partly why Talbot chose to site his clinic on Montserrat, to minimize the chance of contact.

Eighty-five thousand Tempel shares. That's the highest offer Talbot knows of.

Talbot looks down at Babette's body, watches the pulse beat in her throat, the rise and fall of her breasts with respiration. What hideous thing had Godolphin wanted to do to this perfection?

Fury thunders along his nerves. Suddenly he doesn't want to look at Babette any more. He turns a switch in his head and now he's gazing down at Sarai. His gloved hands slide over her tanned, compact body, trace the invisible seams where he'd removed two lower ribs to give her a slimmer waist.

Anger coils around his heart. He's been betrayed.

Feverishly he searches through mental files, calls up the one he wants. Now his hands clasp Cummings's waist, and she gazes up at him with shining Optrim™ eyes. He smiles and, in the simulation, conjures a curved No. 9 scalpel right into his hand.

"How'd you like it done to *you*?" he asks.

Modern scalpels contain microelectronics to disrupt the electrostatic charges that hold body cells together—they read the positive or negative charge and neutralize them, parting tissue without damage. The simulated scalpel in Talbot's hand is old-fashioned surgical steel.

The blade traces blood downward from her sternum. Talbot calls up the laser program and his scent and taste centers fill with the smell of burning fat. Blood sprays over his pale blue tropical shirt as he rips open the abdominal wall. He playfully jabs the peritoneum with the scalpel, then again. It makes a startling *pop* as it perforates. He slices it away, then reaches in with his other hand and tears away the gleaming, fatty omentum. Musty abdominal smells rise from the revealed organs.

"Bet I can make some improvements," he says.

It's easy to clean up—Talbot just tells the simulation to go away and all the blood, all the organs and fluids, the entire excavated corpse, vanish into thin air.

He can feel his pulse speeding through his veins. His respiration seems to be absolutely normal. He holds out a hand and it's perfectly steady.

Things are under control.

He decides to spend the night on his boat, where he can think. He leaves the clinic and walks down the night streets toward the jetty where he's parked his inflatable. Trade winds float around him, bearing the sharp scents of the island. He can hear some of the locals roistering in a back-street shebeen.

"Hiya, doc."

Sweating paranoia swings Talbot around at the sound of the strange voice.

A big white man stands under a dead palm. One hand is in the pocket of his tan bush jacket, and the other holds a briefcase. Talbot controls a shudder and straightens. His features assume a look of cultivated disdain.

"Mr. Godolphin, I presume."

"Not really. That's just what I told that stupid bitch Cummings to call me."

Godolphin steps forward. He towers over Talbot. Talbot isn't a short man but he can feel his hackles rise at the looming threat.

"We gotta talk, doc." Cummings had thought that the voice wasn't British, but in that, as in everything else, she was wrong: she was an American and hadn't heard a Northumberland accent before.

"I don't believe we have anything to say to one another," Talbot says. He'd turn and walk away, but something tells him that it would be unwise to turn his back on this man. He considers walking sideways back to the clinic, then decides it's far too undignified to go slipping along the night streets like a crab, and probably futile anyway.

"I imagine you've got the eighty-five thousand shares, right?" Godolphin says.

Talbot's mouth is dry. He speaks with careful, forceful effort. "I'm not prepared to give them back. Cummings delivered them to me, as per my contract with her. If you want their value back, you can sue to have her future wages docked."

Godolphin's face is lopsided, and his grin seems like a monstrous leer. Talbot's fingers itch to take a scalpel to it.

"Oh hell, doc," Godolphin says. "Keep the shares." He takes his hand out of his pocket—Talbot tenses for a bullet or a blow—and then opens the briefcase. He pulls out a handful of paper shares and offers them. "Want the rest?"

Contempt curls Talbot's lip. "You can't afford my price."

"I dunno—what's your price?"

Talbot laughs. "Don't be absurd, man."

"Name it."

Something inspires Talbot to name the most ridiculous sum he can think of. "Two hundred million Swiss francs."

Wind whips hair around the face sockets on Godolphin's temples. He seems abstracted for a moment, then shrugs. "Okay," he says. "I can manage that."

Talbot shakes his head. "You're pathetic," he says. "If you could command *that* kind of money, in this business I would have heard of you."

"It's not *my* money, doc. I'm just a messenger. I represent somebody else."

"Who?"

Another leer yawns across Godolphin's features. "Only if we agree to do business."

Talbot looks at him. The sum of money is preposterous, so huge it's meaningless. He isn't even tempted by it. "Not possible," he says.

Godolphin shrugs, closes the briefcase, tucks it under his arm. "Let's talk family," he says. "Your lady's just flown from Tahiti to Havana, right? Visiting with some friends, on her way up the well to L4 for some shopping?"

Talbot has played these kind of scenes before, inside the electronic confines of *Conspiracy XVII*. He knows his lines very well.

"What are you implying?" he demands. The injured-husband tones seem to come naturally to his lips.

"All the work you've put in on her body," Godolphin says, "I'm sure she'll look good in her coffin."

"Surely you wouldn't go to those kind of lengths for just a computer simulation? How can it be worth it?"

"I just do what I'm told, doc. Like I said, I'm not running this show."

Talbot affects to consider this development. Electricity pulses along his nerves. He knows how to play this.

"Two hundred mil," Godolphin says. "Think about what you could do with all that."

"I want the other eighty-five thousand shares now," Talbot says. "The two hundred million tomorrow."

Godolphin leers again. "Whatever you say, doc," he says. Talbot wants to reach out and adjust the big, crooked teeth.

"Come up to the clinic. I want to put the stock certificates in my safe."

"Okey-dokey. Just don't do anything stupid, like call the cops from your office. The consequences could be unfortunate."

Talbot thinks of Sarai lying torn somewhere, victim of someone who apprenticed in butchery with a electronically-simulated body and a kitchen knife. The look of terror in her reconstructed eyes. His fine work slashed, ruined, ripped to shreds.

The clinic door opens to his code. It's a small private clinic, not a public hospital with a busy emergency room, and he sees no one on his way to the operating theater. He enters the room, flicks on the lights, reaches for an interface stud.

"You got a safe in here, doc?"

Talbot looks over his shoulder. "Close the door behind you. I don't want anyone to see you here."

Godolphin closes the door. His eyes slide over the room, taking in the table, the gleaming tile, the equipment. Looking for something threatening, seeing nothing. Talbot recognizes his eyes as Optikon Tyrian Violet™. "This ain't your office, doc," Godolphin says.

"I thought I'd show you the merchandise first. Make sure it's what you want, because I only want you here this once." He points to some interface jacks lying on the countertop. "Stud in. You can see what you're buying."

"You got it, doc." The big man brushes hair back from his sockets, inserts the jack. Talbot mentally pulses out commands for the laser to start its powerup sequence, for the defibrillator to turn itself on and switch to its maximum setting of 300 joules.

Idiot, he thinks. *You think I need a* knife *for this?*

He calls up the simulation of Babette. Godolphin's eyes widen as her apparition appears before him on the table. He gives a whistle.

"This is her condition before the operation," Talbot says. The laser hasn't powered-up yet. "You should see her after I'm through."

Godolphin closes his eyes to cut out the distracting appearance of reality, allowing only the simulation to soak into his optical centers. "She looks this good *now*," he says, "why does she need *you?*"

"Call it a preemptive strike against gravity," Talbot says. "She won't look this good forever—might as well get the operation over with."

The familiar commands, the sight of Babette's defenseless image, have calmed him. His pulse remains slightly elevated, and electric tension hums through his nerves, but he's absolutely ready for what he has to do.

Godolphin reaches out, touches a breast. He seems surprised by the warmth. Talbot's mind shrieks at the violation.

"What," Talbot says, "is your boss planning on doing with this simulation once he's got it?"

"I dunno. He's a collector, I guess."

"A connoisseur."

"Something like that." Godolphin palpates Babette's breast. His eyes, moving under closed lids, stray toward her groin.

A green light winks on the laser's command display. *Touch not the cat,* Talbot thinks. "Do you know," he says, "I don't think I want to go through with this."

Godolphin opens his eyes and looks up. "C'mon, doc. We had an agreement. I don't want to have to make you regret anything."

"I think you're the one with regrets. I think you don't realize who you're dealing with."

The laser deploys snakelike from its mount on the ceiling. Its electric motors make little whining noises, and Godolphin looks up. Talbot knows how difficult it is for even experienced operating room techs not to look at the light source when it deploys this way.

Talbot fires a burst into each of Godolphin's eyes. He's not confident that the second shot was on target, but the first one is dead on and Godolphin screams and clutches at his eye sockets. Melted plastic oozes like tears over his lower lids.

The man's still a lot bigger and presumably has combat reflexes—he's still a danger. Talbot reaches for the defibrillator, grabs the paddles, kicks the operating table to one side. Godolphin staggers backward, still screaming. Talbot follows up, slams the paddles to each side of Godolphin's head, triggers the waiting burst of power.

There is a sizzle of burning flesh—the 300 joules are hundreds of times more powerful than the dose used in the bad old days of electroshock therapy. Every muscle in Godolphin's body goes into spasm. He falls, curling into a ball as his more developed flexors win the battle against his extendors.

Godolphin probably doesn't have much of a brain left, but Talbot doesn't want to take any chances. He walks to where the surgical equipment is stored, takes a long stainless-steel probe, strips off the sterile wrapping. He opens Godolphin's shirt, feels professionally for the gap between the fourth and fifth rib, then jams the probe straight to Godolphin's heart. A nasty bit of cartilage or bone intervenes, and Talbot has to punch the probe home by hitting it with the heel of his hand. He has to do this several times, because the heart can survive a single puncture.

As Godolphin twitches his way toward death, Talbot reaches for the telephone on the wall, calls Cuba, and makes arrangements for a small private security detail to go to where Sarai is staying in Havana, escort her to the airport, and stay with her all the way home. He arranges for a chartered plane to be ready at the airport. Then he calls Sarai and explains what she must do. She is first angry, then frightened, but Talbot speaks reassuringly until she agrees.

He returns to Godolphin. The man is dead, staring up at him with his ruined artificial eyes. The right eye is melted, revealing slagged electronics. The second shot was, as Talbot suspected, a little off-target—it burned through Godolphin's lower eyelid and struck a glancing blow. The orb is only partly burned through. Probably enough force was contained in the burst of coherent light to knock the electronics out, at least for the length of time it took to finish Godolphin off.

Talbot looks down at Godolphin and works out what he'll need to get the cooling stiff up on the operating table so that he can get to work.

If there's one thing surgical hospitals are good at, he thinks, it's disposing of unwanted body parts.

The wall phone rings and Talbot jumps half a foot. He takes deep breaths to calm himself, then walks to the phone. He hadn't realized he was so nervous.

"Dr. Talbot," he says.

"I think, doctor," a voice says, "that *you're* the one who doesn't realize who he's dealing with."

Talbot stands frozen for a moment—then his head jerks to look at Godolphin's body. At the eye that hadn't been destroyed, that was still staring up at him from its lifeless socket.

"Very quick, Doctor Talbot," the voice says. "Yes, he was broadcasting the entire meeting from the radio implanted in his skull. The long-range antenna is in the briefcase. I have everything recorded. Especially the part where you stick that long thing into him and finish him off."

Talbot can only stare.

"I think we have a lot to talk about," the voice says. "And by the way, my name is Hugo Barrasa."

Talbot, to his growing horror, recognizes the name perfectly well.

Two hundred million. What an idiot. He could have asked for much more.

Distorting tropical heat rolls around Babette's body as her gurney is carried gingerly out of the chartered aircraft. Alexandru and Talbot stand on the crumbling concrete taxiway to take delivery. Turbines beat at the air, all whining high sonics aimed like drills into Talbot's ears.

"You don't look so very well, doctor," Alexandru says.

Talbot wipes sweat from his forehead. "Perhaps I've been overworking a trifle." He's been playing *Conspiracy XVII* night and day, hoping it will hone his mind, accustom him to moments of terror and desperation. Give him some idea of what he should *do*.

"I hope you aren't under too much pressure." Alexandru's smoked monocle bores into Talbot's forehead. "Calling your wife back with a pair of bodyguards—perhaps that was a little . . . overreactive?"

"A lot of crazy people out there," Talbot says.

Alexandru says nothing.

Talbot holds out his hand. "Steady as a rock," he says. "Not to worry."

This time it's Babette's real body on the table, warm and breathing and staring up with dim uncomprehending eyes at the assembled surgical team. There's a gleam of saliva in the corner of her mouth. Little wires run out of sockets set discreetly above the ear, under the hairline where it won't normally be seen.

Except it's not quite Babette's body, not yet. It's Babette's clone, ripened from some epithelial cells taken from Babette's arm. Grown in a tank, fed on a diet of nutrients and hormones. She looks about sixteen, the age when Babette's career really started to take off. Exercised by electrode, the musculature is superb. The brain is empty and contains less information about the world than that of a newborn. One of the wires running into her skull is connected to the brain's pleasure center, feeding it a trickle of power, keeping the full-grown newborn happy no matter what they do to her.

After the surgery is over—after the last bruise fades and the final scar is erased—the real Babette will download her mind into a liquid crystal analog in a clinic in Nice, which will then in turn be fed into the clone.

Babette will rise again—young, beautiful, and in better shape than she ever was.

It's a new technique, not without risks. Some patients suffer personality changes, memory loss, sometimes neuromuscular problems. But Babette will still have her original body, as long as it lasts, and if the technique works, she'll have a brand new body and brand new career.

There'll be two of her—no doubt her production company is already acquiring mother-and-daughter stories.

She could be a goddess forever.

Baca-Torrijos swabs away the drool from Babette's cheek. Everyone's ready.

Betrayed, Talbot thinks.

It's time to make the first cut.

He picks up the knife, and out of the corner of one eye he sees the anaesthesiologist's cheek muscles twitch upward in an anticipatory smile. . . .

My precious Babette. That's what Barrasa calls her.

"I want her to myself," he says. "A precious Babette for my very own."

At least Talbot doesn't have to worry about Babette's simulations being duplicated and sold by the tens of thousands. Barrasa doesn't need the money. Besides, he has principles.

"Filthy perverts touching my precious Babette?" he says. "Doing atrocious things to her? Never!"

He has taken to calling Talbot at odd hours, usually after viewing another recording of Godolphin's murder. He appreciates the economy of Talbot's technique.

"I myself have killed," Barrasa says. "I know what is involved to murder in cold blood. You and I, we both believe in acting with precision. Once our minds are made up, nothing can stop us."

Talbot can only wish that were true. He can't think what to do except follow Barrasa's instructions.

Forget the two hundred million. Talbot's doing this for free, not counting the stock certificates that Cummings surrendered. He'd thrown the second bunch of certificates into the Caribbean, along with the dismembered parts of Godolphin's body in weighted plastic sacks. Back when he'd thought there was some wild hope he could evade Barrasa's dictates.

No way. Not once Talbot saw the recording, saw the cold, businesslike, intelligent, hyper-aware gleam in his own eyes as he hammered the probe home. Something tells him that a jury will not be sympathetic to this. Nor will the Prime Minister.

Barrasa wants the simulations. Every single one of them. And Talbot delivers.

Barrasa was born in Montevideo, but went into orbit when young. He became an asteroid miner and made a fortune. It was said, however, that many of his most profitable claims were not his own, that his fortune was not built on successful pioneering, but on successful development of salvage claims after the previous inhabitants of the mining sites suffered mysterious decompression or fatal mining equipment failures. But after a while people stopped saying those sorts of things about Barrasa. He had became too wealthy, too powerful, and too dangerous for people to talk frankly about him at all. He owned several profitable asteroids, some of them towed into lunar orbit, as well as a small habitat of his own containing his smelters, offices, and about two thousand people. He was one of the class of people the screamsheets were now referring to as "Orbitals," people who had no terrestrial allegiances left, for whom Earth was a blue-white abstraction floating in the void.

But the Orbitals' indifference to Earth did not include disregard for the electronic media that reached through the vacuum and into their minds at the speed of light. Somewhere in his lonely life, in some hellish pressurized habitat, Barrasa had encountered Babette.

"I want to experience her purity," Barrasa says. "She has sinned, and she knows this, but in her inmost heart she is undefiled. It is the same with me. I have done bad things, but in my soul I am an innocent child."

In his soul, Talbot knows, Barrasa is deranged. The boy's been sucking solar flares and breathing vacuum too long.

Talbot surrenders the recording of Babette's body, plus the recordings of all his rehearsals. He is told to enclose the data cube in a waterproof container, then hang it on a rope over the stern of his yacht overnight. Presumably a diver picked it up, because next morning it was gone.

He tries not to think about what Barrasa is doing with the recordings.

Meanwhile, the goddess is built, day by day. Eye implants, breast implants, buttock lift, ischial implants, two ribs removed to narrow the waist. Wounds drain, bruises fade, scars are reduced with the laser. The clone, months old and already a wirehead jack-junkie, gazes up through it all with a simpering idiot smile. Talbot finds it difficult to concentrate. Whenever he sees Babette's insides, the meaty red grain of muscle or the semiliquid yellow gleam of fat, he begins to see Barrasa there, Barrasa feeling up Babette's insides with pathological devotion, or stooping to kiss or lick the wounds.

Once, with such a vision on his mind, Talbot seriously burns Baca-Torrijos's hand. He never lost control of the laser before.

He plays *Conspiracy XVII* obsessively. The labyrinth of intrigue grows—the Scottish connection is minor, almost a distraction, but he finds leads in Inverness that take him to Ecuador and the Ivory Coast. He escapes death a dozen times. He can almost taste the solution, but it remains tantalizingly out of reach.

He wishes the game were real, and not his life.

Sarai, after her initial fright, has grown bored with staying under guard on the island. She doesn't have many friends here, Talbot is either in the operating room or in the face all the time, and she wonders who those three a.m. phone calls are from. She begins to complain about his neglect.

The goddess nears readiness. Talbot is in awe of his own work: Babette is perfection, the fulfillment of his every professional dream. Whatever happens, he knows he will have created one true masterpiece.

After everything is complete, the clone body will be scanned one more time, for Babette to voice her final approval and to have a record on file for any future operations, and then, assuming she approves, Babette will download her mind into her new flesh.

"Doctor Talbot," Alexandru says. "I must insist that you take a few days off. You're obviously working too hard."

"I'm a doctor," Talbot says. "I'm used to it."

They sit on the clinic's pleasant terrace under an umbrella of thatch. Alexandru has a piña colada, Talbot his gasless mineral water. Some of Talbot's other patients—minor celebrities, a famous race driver recuperating after a stupid accident with lighter fluid—are sitting to take the sun, or swim (scars encased in waterproof gel) in the pool below.

"I must insist," Alexandru says. "I have to think of Babette's safety. You had an accident the other day."

Anger spills through Talbot's mind. "How did you hear about that?" he demands.

"That doesn't matter. The point is that you are under extreme stress, and I must insist that you take some time off."

"Absurd."

"Yes? Hold out your hand. See if it trembles."

"Don't be ridiculous." Talbot takes a firmer grip on his glass of mineral water.

"Three days, doctor. Take three days off. I should have realized when you brought your wife back under guard that . . ." Alexandru falls silent. He looks carefully at Talbot. "Was there some *reason* that you brought her back in such a panic? Has someone been making threats?"

"No. I just thought . . ." Talbot flails for words. "I feel better when she's here. It helps me work."

"Ah." Alexandru lets the syllable hang in the air. "You brought her back, but still you hardly see her."

"Mr. Alexandru. This is none of your business."

"So you say." He rather clearly disagrees.

Talbot feels sweat prickle on his nape. Alexandru knows something is wrong.

Talbot takes the days off and spends them on his boat, faced into the world of *Conspiracy XVII*. The calls from Barrasa keep coming.

"My precious Babette's final recording," Barrasa says. "We should discuss the delivery."

"I want my own recording back," Talbot says. "The one of me and Godolphin."

"I can give you the cube with that recording," Barrasa says, "but how will you know I don't have a copy? There could be a thousand copies in existence by now."

"There had better not be," Talbot says.

"You'll have to trust me, I'm afraid. And why shouldn't you? I wish only to participate with you in the miracle of Babette. You must love her yourself, adore her, to have done these beautiful things to her. I am in awe of your skill."

Talbot forces himself to respond politely. "Thank you," he says.

"And you do these fine things for other celebrities, yes? Celebrities that people would want for their very own."

"No one like Babette," Talbot says. "No one at all important."

"But people would pay good money for these celebrities, yes? And why not give the simulations to them?"

"That would be highly unethical."

"For a doctor, yes. Not for a cold-blooded killer."

Talbot is appalled. "You want to share Babette with these people?" he demands.

Barrasa's answer is quick. "Not my precious Babette. Never her. But these others—whores, media trash, gossip mongers—all the people who will flock to you once it's known you worked on Babette—why not *them?*"

Talbot opens his mouth to reply, and then a realization comes to him.

"Keep talking," he says.

And Barrasa comes back instantly, promoting his idea of Talbot selling his patients to every lunatic in the Earth system. Talbot barely listens.

Barrasa's answer was immediate. He's not off in orbit somewhere, because that would mean a time-lag between one person's speech and another's. Barrasa's fairly close, and probably on Earth.

Talbot should have noticed this the first time Barrasa called.

But now that he is finally aware, Talbot knows exactly what to do.

The goddess lies, like Sleeping Beauty, awaiting the waking kiss of the electronics. She's perfect, as perfect as Talbot and all his skill can make her.

She's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. Talbot examines the body with reverence and awe. His palate is dry, his pulse elevated.

He wills the eyes to open, to look into his. They remain shut.

Wires trail delicately out of the sockets on Babette's head. She lies on her own bed, in her own suite at the clinic. The room is filled with fresh-cut flowers. Dr. Garibaldi, from the clinic in Nice, has arrived to supervise the transfer.

There is a knock on the door. Talbot opens it and allows Babette's cosmetician to enter. Babette will awaken in a freshly made-up body.

Resentment hums in Talbot's thoughts. Why try to improve on perfection?

He leaves the room. He isn't needed for this part, and besides, he has other things to do.

Talbot goes to his office, locks the door, tells the computer to refuse all calls. He puts the studs in his sockets and faces in and gives the computer his superuser passwords. His mind rolls into the processor. Talbot calls up software and uses his superuser status to monitor the phone banks. When the phone call comes, he'll be ready.

Babette, he knows, is at an exclusive villa in the Italian piedmont. She's made several widely-publicized appearances in the last few weeks in order to draw off any attention from what's been going on at Talbot's clinic.

Babette, just that morning, had downloaded her brain into a vat of liquid crystal in Nice. And Nice is just waiting for the signal from Montserrat in order to transfer the program into the mind of Babette's clone.

Talbot waits, himself, for the same signal.

The signal comes. And Talbot triggers his own program.

Hello, Señor Barrasa. Surprised to see me?

What goes on in his own skull is difficult to define. Talbot's aware of things happening, of memories being triggered, reflexes being examined, scents rising unbidden . . . of something moving through his mind with an awesome, inexorable power. At the same time he's alert enough to monitor the progress of the massive electronic buffer he's set up, to make certain the program is performing as per schedule.

He's interfered with the process. The signal from Nice is arriving, yes, but not in the clone's mind. It's going to an electronic oblivion, a lightspeed shuttle to nowhere . . . Talbot's dumping it.

Instead it's his own mind that's going into Babette's clone. There's no certainty of this succeeding—there's only a decent chance of success if the minds match to begin with—but Talbot knows it's the only solution to his problems.

Señor Barrasa, we need to talk.

How many artists, he wonders, have the chance to inhabit, to physically inhabit, their own greatest work? Only those who alter their bodies, with bodybuilding or implants or tattooing, and that work is crude compared to what Talbot has done.

He's going to incarnate himself in a divinity. He will be both a goddess and his own principal worshipper.

Babette, he thinks, is going to make some odd career moves. Buy a body sculpting clinic, get a license to practice. But why not? Personality changes and memory loss are a side effect of the clone transfer process. If she can't remember certain important details, certain important people, Babette can chalk it up to an incomplete transfer.

Instead of two Babettes, there will be two Talbots. The first one is a murderer and doesn't matter. Though it's the first Talbot, the unimportant one—the *mortal*—who has an important task to accomplish.

Barrasa has to be taken care of. Talbot is willing to bet that it's going to be easy.

He knows where Barrasa is. Once Talbot realized that he was in the neighborhood, he bought some satellite photographs and did some elementary research. There's been a yacht cruising in the channel between Montserrat and Antigua for the last several weeks, just turning lazy circles in the blue. A little checking confirmed it was owned by Barrasa's corporation.

Babette's earlier recordings had been picked up by a diver. Where had the diver come from but a boat?

Talbot should have realized it long ago.

Señor Barrasa, look what I brought. I thought I should bring it in person.

On the desk next to Talbot's hand is a surgical scalpel. The shaft is hard plastic contoured to his hand, and the blade under its plastic protector is the latest-generation ceramic. It won't set off a metal detector, and it will fit nicely, unobtrusively, delicately, in one of Talbot's ribbed socks.

Talbot will deliver Babette's last recording himself, motor straight to where Barrasa's yacht waits. He knows Barrasa will want to be alone when he gazes at his precious Babette. But he won't be alone, not if Talbot insists on pointing out some of the fine features of his work.

Let me explain something, Señor Barrasa. I want to show you a new procedure I performed just before the transfer. If you will just look over here? You'll have to crane your neck.

Talbot is willing to bet that he can slice Barrasa's throat before the man can call out or otherwise interfere. Talbot is also willing to bet that he can erase any incriminating recordings before the body is discovered.

And if he's discovered or thwarted or arrested afterwards or killed by the man's guards, so what? Talbot, the mortal, isn't the important one.

That Talbot can die.

Because the other Talbot, Talbot the goddess, will have risen.

Lights glow in Talbot's optical centers. The program has run its course.

Talbot faces out of the machine and removes the studs from his skull. His mouth is slightly dry, as are his palms. His pulse is only slightly elevated.

He knows he will do well. He needs only to know whether the transfer succeeded.

He puts the scalpel in his sock, rises from his chair, unlocks the door, walks to Babette's suite. Alexandru and other members of Babette's entourage are there.

"Is Babette all right?" Talbot asks.

Alexandru takes the smoked monocle out of his eye, wipes it with a handkerchief. "She was a bit confused, but that was only to be expected. She recognized me."

"That sounds promising. May I see her?"

"Dr. Garibaldi gave her a sedative. He wants her to rest."

"Ah."

Alexandru returns his monocle to his eye and looks at Talbot. "Babette had a message for you. She had a little difficulty talking, but she was very insistent. She said to tell you that everything had gone perfectly."

Cold joy tingles in Talbot's frame. He compels himself to nod graciously. "Thank you. That sets me at ease."

"Things have gone well so far."

"I think I'll spend the afternoon on the boat. Maybe go out for a ride."

Alexandru gives him a nod. "You deserve some relaxation, Doctor, after all your work."

Talbot is already mentally rehearsing his lines. *Señor Barrasa, look what I have. Look what I have for you.*

He looks at Alexandru and thinks of the scalpel hidden in his sock.

"Perhaps I'll catch a big fish," he says.

And smiles.●

With special thanks to Sage Walker.

FROM:

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

STRANGE PLURALS

Strange Plurals there are that live like Swine
And have no Teeth like yours and mine.

Their diet consists of milk-fed Mice
That have been stuffed with Flies and Lice.

Though Passers-by may stop and stare
They lead their Lives with no more care

Than Oxen on their sunlit leas
Or numbers in their Matrices.

—Tom Disch

by Jack McDevitt

TIME'S ARROW

art: Anthony Bari

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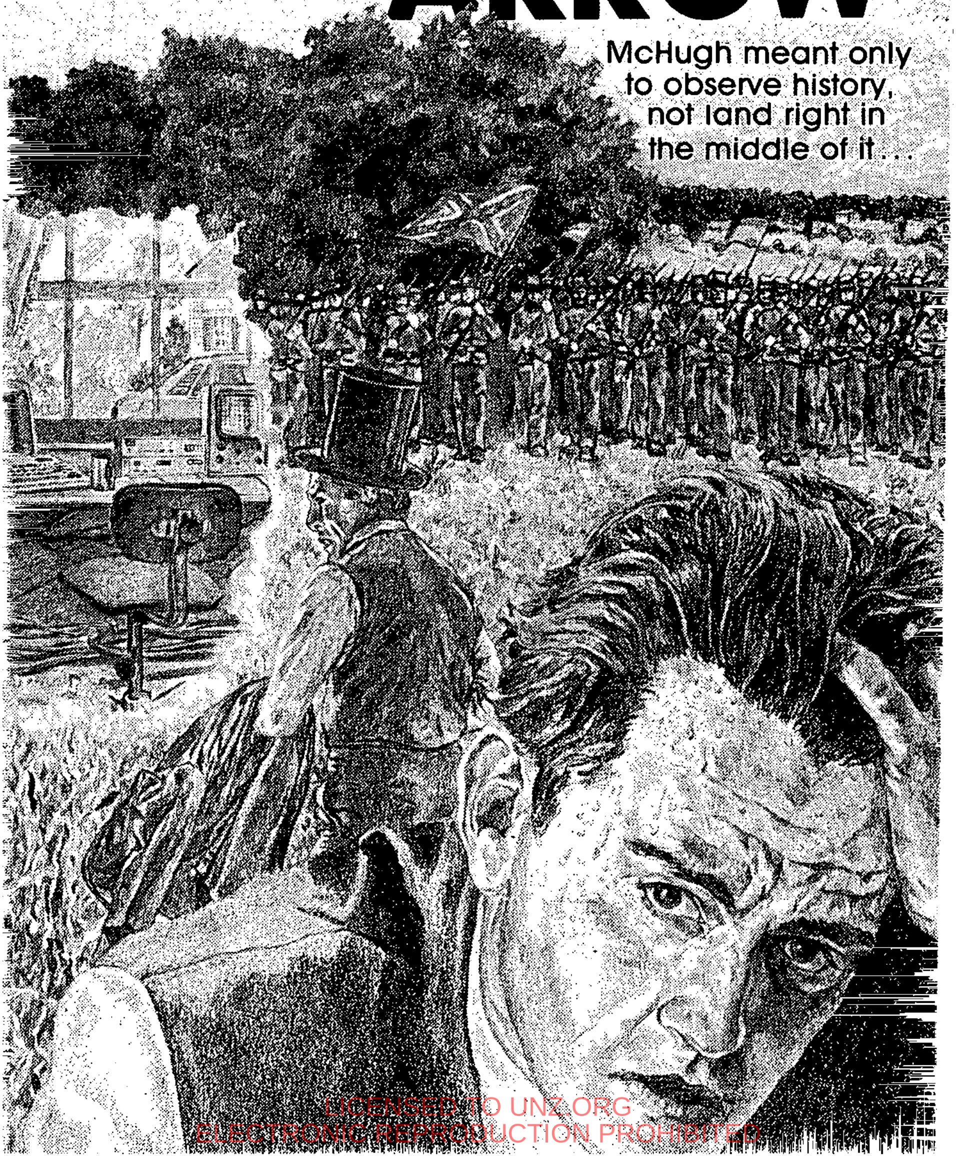
McHugh meant only to observe history, not land right in the middle of it . . .



"It can't be done." I stared at him, and at the gunmetal ten-foot-high torus that dominated the room. "Time travel is prohibited."

He pushed a stack of printouts off a coffee table to make room for his Coors, and fell onto the sofa. It sagged and threatened to collapse under his bulk. "Gillie," he said, "you've got all those old Civil War flags and that drum from—ah—?"

"Fredericksburg."

"Yeah. And how many times have you been to the battlefields? Listen, we can go see the real thing. Fort Sumter. Bull Run. You name it." His easy, confident smile chilled me. "It is possible to reverse the arrow of time. Tonight you and I will have dinner in the nineteenth century."

"Mac," I said, adopting a reasonable tone, "think about it a minute. If it could be done, someone will eventually learn how. If that ever happens, history would be littered with tourists. They'd be *everywhere*. They'd be on the *Santa Maria*, they'd be at Appomattox with Polaroids, they'd be waiting outside the tomb, for God's sake, on Easter morning."

He nodded. "I know. It *is* odd. I don't understand why there's no evidence."

I drew back thick curtains. Sunlight sliced through grimy windows. Across the empty street, I could see Harvey Keating, trying to get his lawnmower started. "In fact, if you were the father of time travel, they'd be out there now. Knocking down barricades—"

He nodded. "I hear what you're saying." He looked past me, and out toward the front of the house. A pickup cruised by. Keating's lawnmower kicked into life. "Still," he said quietly, "it works." He jabbed an index finger toward the torus, and then expanded his arms in a grand gesture that took in the entire room, computer banks, gauges, power cord tangles, rolltop desk. Everything. "It works," he repeated, even more softly. "I've tested it."

I blinked. "How? Are you saying you've been to the nineteenth century?"

His gray eyes lost focus. "I've been *somewhere*," he said. "I'm not sure where." He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "I finally realized the problem was in the stasis coils—"

"What happened, Mac?"

"Gillie, I landed in the middle of a riot."

"You're kidding."

"Yes. I damn near got trampled. There was a labor demonstration on the other side."

"On the other side?"

"Of the nexus." He gestured toward the torus. "At least that's what it looked like. People carrying signs, making speeches. Just as I crossed over, a bomb went off. In the back of the crowd somewhere. Cops waded in, swinging sticks. It was pretty grim. *But they had handlebar mustaches. And old-time uniforms.*" He took a deep breath. "We were outside somewhere. In the street." His eyes focused behind me. "Goddammit, Gillie, I've done it. I was *really* there."

"Where? Where *were* you?"

"I think it was the Haymarket Riot. I was on Jefferson Street, and that's where it happened. I spent the day at the library trying to pin it down."

"The Haymarket Riot? Why would you go there?"

"I was trying to get to the Scopes monkey trial." He shrugged. "I missed. But what difference does it make?" His eyes gleamed. "I've *done* it." He swept up a half-full beercan and heaved it across the room. "I have goddam done it!"

"Show me," I said.

He smiled. Genuine pleasure. "That's why you're here. How would you like to see *Our American Cousin*? On *the* night?"

I stared at him.

He handed me another Coors—it was mine that had gone for a ride—stepped over a snarl of power cables and octopus plugs, turned on a couple of the computers and opened a closet. Status lamps glowed, and columns of numbers appeared on monitors. "You'll need these," he said, tossing me some clothes. "We don't want to be conspicuous."

"I think I'd prefer to see him at Gettysburg."

"Oh." He looked annoyed. "I could arrange that, but I'd have to recalibrate. It would take a couple of days." The clothes were right out of *Gone With the Wind*. He produced a second set for himself.

"I don't think they'll fit," I said.

He nodded his satisfaction as if I hadn't spoken, and jabbed at a keyboard. A legend appeared on one of the monitors: TEMPORAL INTERLOCK GREEN. "The heart of the system," he said, indicating a black box with two alternately flashing red mode lamps. "It's the Transdimensional Interface. The TDI." He placed his right hand gently against its polished surface. "It coordinates power applications with field angles—"

I let him talk, understanding none of it. I was an old friend of McHugh's, which was why I was there. But I was no physicist. Not that you had to be, to understand that the past is irrevocable. While he rambled on, I climbed reluctantly into the clothes he'd provided.

The twin lamps blinked at a furious rate, slowed, changed to amber, and came gradually to a steady green.

"The energy field will be established along the nexus. We'll make our transition about a mile and a half outside D.C., at nine in the morning, local time. Should allow us to travel to the theater at our leisure."

His fingers danced across the keyboard. Relays clicked, and somewhere in the walls power began to build. A splinter of white light ignited in the center of the torus. It brightened, lengthened, rotated. "Don't look at it," McHugh said. I turned away.

The floor trembled. Windows rattled, a few index cards fluttered off a shelf, a row of black binders fell one by one out of a bookcase. "Any moment now, Gillie," he said. The general clatter intensified until I thought the building would come down on us. It ended in a loud electrical bang and a burst of sudden sunlight. Ozone flooded the room. Time broke off. Stopped. McHugh held one arm high, shielding his eyes. A final binder tottered and crashed. Then a blast of wind knocked me off my feet and across the coffee table. I went down in a hurricane of printouts, pencils, clips, and beer cans, grabbed a table leg; and held on. Magnetic disks and plastic plates whipped through the room. A chair fell over and began to move toward the torus. Windows exploded; the curtains flapped wildly.

A rectangular piece of clear sky, a cloud-flecked hole, filled the torus. Everything not bolted down, books, paper plates, card files, monitors, a rolodex, you name it, was being sucked toward it, and blown through. McHugh almost went too when the console to which he was clinging broke loose.

He bounced past, terrified, and seized the sofa. The console crunched through the hole, sailed out among the clouds. Mac's lower half went next. He screamed.

The sky was full of clothes and printouts and magazines and index cards.

I maneuvered my table closer until I could reach him. He held out a hand, but I ignored it and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. His eyes were wide with terror. The paper storm continued: where the hell was it all coming from? A computer broke loose and went out.

Like the console, it slid across the sky. I watched it, and, impossibly, my senses rotated, the way they do when you're sitting under one of those giant cinema screens, and I realized I was looking straight down. I could see forest down there, and a river. And green and gold squares of cultivated land.

Something with feathers flapped through a window, blurred across the room and was flung out among the clouds.

The river flowed past farmhouses, past orchards, past a town.

The land was unbroken by highways or automobile traffic. But down through the clouds a half-built obelisk gleamed in full sunlight.

"Gillie—" He let go of me long enough to clap me on the back. "That's the Washington Monument."

"Mac," I howled. "What the hell's going on?"

"We're *here*, goddammit. *Now* what do you say?" He laughed and his eyes watered and the table lurched a few inches. Matter of time.

Do something. Close the goddam hole. An octopus socket lay nearby. Cut the power, that was it. But when I picked it up, McHugh's state of alarm soared. He stabbed a frantic finger at his legs. I'd pulled him back somewhat, but everything below his knees was still thrust out into space.

Okay: try something else. The coffee table was too wide to go through the hole. But if I could keep it sideways, I might be able to wedge it against the torus. Block off the hole. Not all of it, but enough.

I changed my position, got behind the table. And pushed. McHugh saw what I was doing, and nodded encouragement. Yes. His lips formed the word. Yes, yes. I held on as long as I could, fearful that the table would twist in the gale, that I would lose it, and then follow it. "Get your legs out of the way," I screamed. "I need room."

He shook his head. Can't do it. But I didn't need to tell him that I no longer controlled events, that the table was moving under its own power, and that he should do it or his legs were going south. He made another effort, and wrenched himself clear just as the furniture and I arrived at the nexus. The table jammed tight against the sides of the torus.

It shut off *some* of the drag. Not much, but some. More important, it gave McHugh a place to put his feet. He was now reeling in the octopus plug himself, and began methodically, angrily, disconnecting everything. Across the room, a radio came on. Then, abruptly, the hurricane died.

"You were right," I said in the sudden silence. "We were about a mile and a half from D.C."

"Ready?" He stood by the TDI. It was almost two weeks after the first attempt.

"Should we wear seatbelts?"

He grinned. Very much the man in charge. "You can have your little joke. But I've made some adjustments on the transition phase. I think I can promise we'll be at ground level this time." The twin mode lamps on the TDI went to green.

"Same destination?"

"Of course." He hovered over the Macintosh which would initiate the sequence. "Ready?"

I nodded, positioning myself near the table.

He touched the keyboard, and the tiny star reappeared. I turned away as it brightened. We got the electrical effects again, and the ozone. And the sudden, intoxicating bite of salt air. The hole was back.

It was night on the other side of the torus. A lovely evening, composed of a broad dark sea, blazing constellations, and a lighthouse. A quarter moon lay on the surface. Surf boomed, and a line of white water approached.

I felt spray.

"Goddam." McHugh froze.

The ocean surged in. Black water crashed against the furniture, boiled around the walls, smashed the windows. And shorted the lights.

The hole collapsed.

"Here we go." He wiped his jaw with the back of his hand. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"Okay."

"This time we'll get it right." There was no smile now.

Everything was bolted down and well off the floor. The room had been cleared of all furniture and nonessentials. I wondered whether we hadn't been lucky. What would have happened if the hole had opened in the depths of the ocean? Or far beneath the surface in a stratum crushed under ten thousand feet of rock? "Mac," I said, "maybe we should forget it."

He shook his head vigorously. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I mean it. I get the feeling somebody's trying to tell us something."

McHugh pulled on his waistcoat and bent over a display. "System's fully charged. We're all set, Gillie. You want to do the honors?"

Reluctantly, I walked over to the TDI, looked at him, looked at the torus. Looked at the keyboard. It was a new computer.

"Okay," he said, trying to look casual, but bracing himself all the same. "Any time."

I did it, and the process started again.

This time, we found summer. Green meadows stretched toward a nearby line of wooded hills. Goldenrod, thistles, and black-eyed susans covered the fields. Afternoon invaded the room, and, with a thump, the air conditioner kicked in.

"At last," said McHugh, standing before the torus, gazing through it. "1865," he breathed. For a long time, he didn't move. Then: "Now, listen, Gillie: the nexus will close five minutes after we pass through. But it will open again for five minutes every twelve hours until we come back to shut it down. Okay? Make sure you remember where we are. In case you have to find your own way back."

Without another word, he stepped through. His image flickered momentarily, as if in a heat wave. On the other side, he raised a fist in silent triumph, and gazed at his surroundings. "Come on, Gillie. Come on over." He produced a bottle and two glasses, filled them, and held one toward me.

I hesitated.

"It's okay," he said.

I gathered my courage, and stepped through of the time device. I will admit I was now convinced. Maybe it was that the notion of time travel was no more absurd than the presence of a broad field in one's living room. In any case, I strolled from the carpet onto dry grass. The air was thick with the drowsy buzz of insects and the heat of the sun. I took the glass. The bright liquid within sparkled. "To you, Mac," I said.

McHugh loosened his tie. "To the Creator," he said, "who has given us a universe with such marvelous possibilities."

The afternoon smelled vaguely of sulfur. I took my coat off. We stood on a broad field enclosed by rising forest. A dark haze hung over the valley. In the distance, I could make out a town. It looked small. Hot and dusty. Several clusters of farm buildings were distributed at the foot of the ridges, guarded by low stone walls and fences constructed of posts and rails. A wagon waited in one of the farmyards. But they all stood strangely empty. No farmers. No cows. No horses or dogs. A dirt road, also fenced, wandered through the center of the valley.

I fell in beside McHugh and we angled off toward the road. "Where the hell is everybody?" I asked.

He ignored the question. "Do you notice the farmhouses have no TV antennas?"

"I notice," I said. "On the other hand, it must be July or August." I mopped my brow. "Certainly not April."

He nodded, but showed no sign of disappointment. He was happy to have arrived somewhere. *Anywhere*, if it turned out to be Lincoln's America. "I agree. We've missed again. But what the hell—"

Nothing moved anywhere in the valley. The sun was hot in my eyes. and I knew the landscape.

I knew the ridges, the farms, the town. "Mac," I said, "where are the birds?" The sky was empty. Behind us, the torus hovered, McHugh's computer-laden back room vivid against the rolling hills and forest. "Maybe we should go back."

He responded by removing his jacket. "You go back if you want to, Gillie." His eyes gleamed, and he looked happier than I'd ever seen him. He fished his watch out of his pocket, glanced at it, looked at the sun, which was on our left, and shrugged. "Let's make it three o'clock," he said, setting the timepiece and winding it. He dropped it back into the pocket and folded the coat over his arm.

Near the town, a flag fluttered from a stone wall. We were too far away to count the number of stars in the blue field, but it *was* the national colors. I was squinting at it, when I heard the breath catch in McHugh's throat. He was peering over my shoulder, back toward the torus, toward the line of hills behind it.

"What's wrong?" I asked. His workroom still floated peacefully in the afternoon.

"The woods," he said. "Behind the nexus."

Yes: among the trees, something was moving.

As I watched, the sun struck metal, and the forest came alive with men in gray uniforms. They remained within the shelter of the trees, but I could see them moving, kneeling just beyond the sunlight, others coming in behind. Forming up.

My God. "What's going on?" asked McHugh. "Where are we?"

A bugle call split the afternoon.

And they came out in oiled precision, bayonets gleaming among battle flags. Drums rolled. Columns wheeled smartly into line and started quickstep toward us.

Behind them, on the hilltops, guns roared. Puffs of smoke appeared on the opposite ridge. And I got a good look at the standards: "Son of a bitch, Mac," I said. "It's the 24th Virginia."

I watched them come. They seemed unaware of the torus, which I suspected was invisible from the rear. Their lines were perfectly dressed, officers with drawn swords on horseback. There were thousands of them, literally parading out into that open field as far as I could see.

"Over there," I said. "The 7th Virginia. And up the line will be the 11th. Jesus." I was overwhelmed by the majesty of it. "You're right, Mac. We're *here*. Son of a bitch—"

"Gillie," he said, "we're *where?* What the hell's going on?"

A long orchestrated crescendo shook the top of the opposite ridge. "Down," I screamed, throwing myself on my belly and covering my head.

The ground erupted. Earth and rocks flew. Holes were blown in the ranks of the advancing men. Others hurried to fill up the spaces. "This is *Kemper's* Brigade," I said. He was staring at me, not comprehending. I was surveying the ridges and road. The fences and stone walls. The farms. The town. "You've been dumped on again, Mac." I was getting to my feet. "We've got to get away from here."

The cannonade was deafening. Thunder rolled down from both slopes. The troops came on. Silent. Walking into the fire because their generals didn't understand yet that war had changed.

McHugh was trying to restrain me. "Stay down," he said. "We'll wait it out."

"No," I shrieked. "Not this one. We've got to get back before the hole closes."

"You're crazy. You'll get killed."

"We won't survive out here." I was shaking my head violently. "You know what that is back there? It's Seminary Ridge."

McHugh was close to my ear, but he had to shout anyway. "So what?"

"Pickett's Charge," I said. "We're in the middle of Pickett's Charge."

We got back moments before a cannonball roared through the workroom, blew three walls apart, collapsed the front porch, and nailed Harvey Keating's Toyota, which was parked in his driveway.

The equipment was in ruins. Again.

Nevertheless, McHugh was exultant. "You see?" he said. "It *is* possible."

And I trembled. I trembled because I knew that, for a few minutes on the third day of the battle, I had actually been at Gettysburg.

And I trembled for another reason. "Mac," I said. "You've made four attempts now. All four have been disasters."

"But we're *learning*," he said. "We're getting better. You have to expect problems. But we *know* how to *travel*."

"That's what scares me." I looked around the smoking ruins. "What are the odds against *accidentally* arriving at the exact time and place of a major event?"

He shrugged. "Slim, I would think."

"You've done it twice."

I knew he wouldn't quit, though. He bought more equipment, and went back to work. "Making improvements," he said. A few weeks later he was ready to try again, and issued another invitation. I told him no thanks. I could see he was disappointed in me.

But hell, I can take a hint.

So I wasn't too surprised when his newspapers started piling up. I waited a couple of days and broke in.

The house was empty.

In the back room, I found his equipment intact. Except for the TDI: a stone-tipped feathered arrow jutted from its polished black metal. It had penetrated right between the mode lamps.●

FROM:
A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

EITHER/OR

Either and Or came to a door.
Either would enter, but not before Or,
So still they stand outside that door,
But now their names are Neither and Nor.

—Tom Disch

FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

THE PRESENT TENSE

The future is ahead of me,
The past is all behind,
But I live in the present, free
And only partly blind.

—Tom Disch

EPITAPH FOR THE PAST TENSES

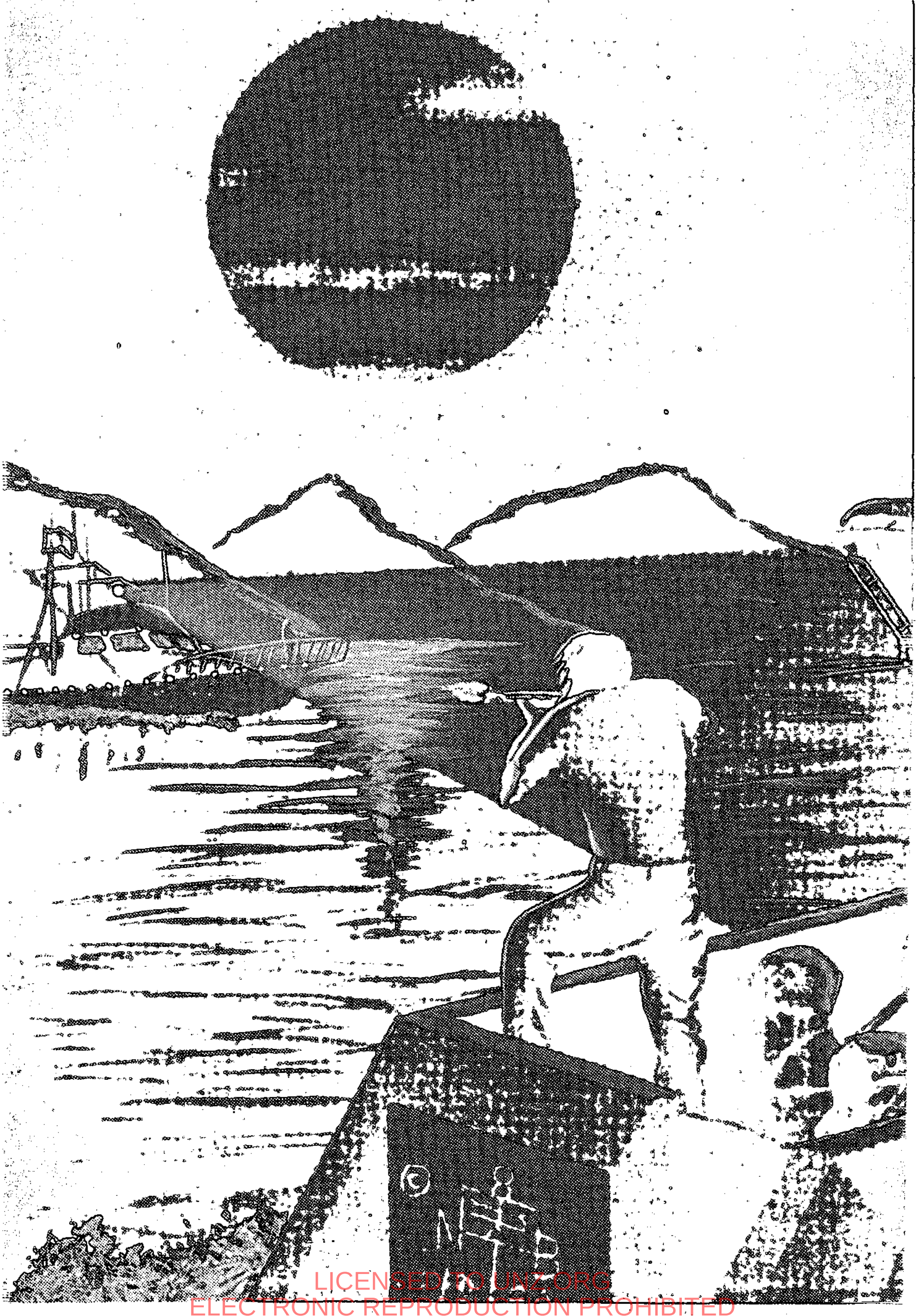
That we once were was all our boast.
The Present came—and burnt our toast.
For us the bidden 'Rest in Peace'
Becomes a jest at our lost lease
On living Life and breathing Breath.
Those who have died must live in Death.

—Tom Disch

THE FUTURE TENSE

Someday I will know what to do,
And then I'll surely act—
Till which time I'll sit and stew,
A model of poise and tact.

—Tom Disch

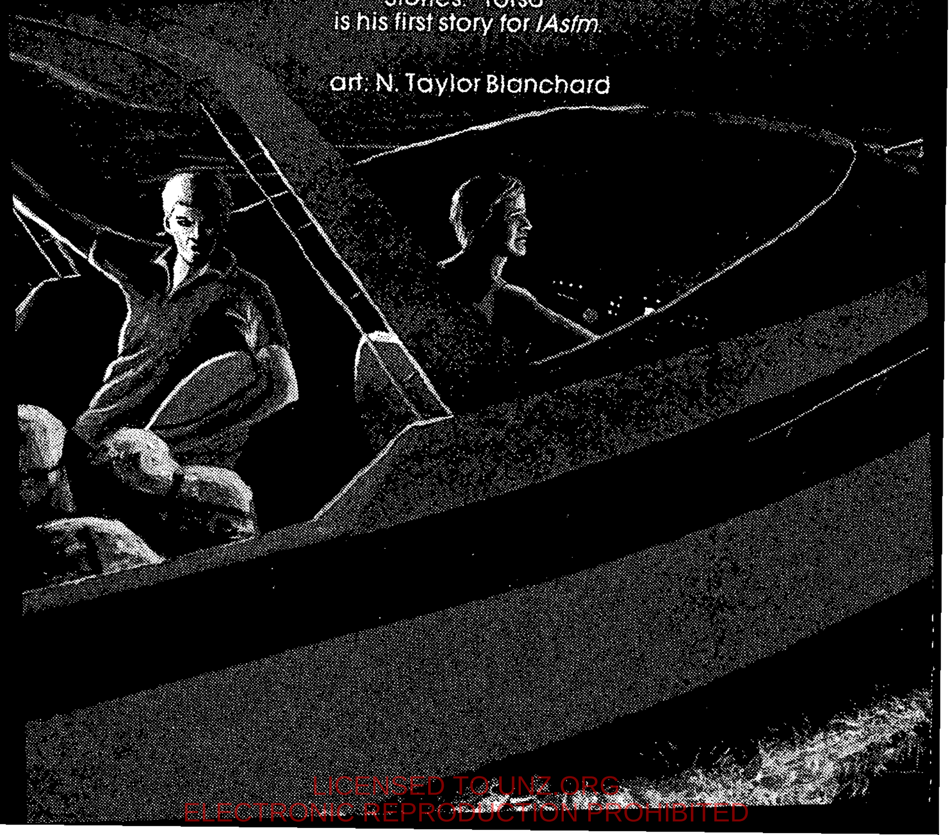


TORSO

by Leonard Carpenter

Leonard Carpenter "is the proud author of four Conan the Barbarian novels, with more on the way." Mr. Carpenter lives in Santa Maria, California, with his wife and their twelve-year-old twin daughters. His short fiction and his poetry have appeared in *Amazing*, *2AM*, *Argonaut*, and *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. "Torso" is his first story for *IAsfm*.

art: N. Taylor Blanchard



Starlight; herb-scented Aegean night, with brisk waves rolling in beneath the keel of the motor yacht. The only sound noticeable over the near-continuous crash of surf was the shifting scrape of loose stones in the crumbling pier. I turned from its low, jagged silhouette to look down the lines of phosphorescent breakers surging and dissipating, washing a cove where biremes might have beached twenty-five hundred years ago. Satyrs could have courted pale-limbed nymphs here by moonlight, or muscular Greek heroes their adoring boys.

The cove wasn't much of a mooring for modern boats, power-craft with crews too small to drag them up out of reach of the waves. Storm swells running before a strong wind from the west could have pounded us apart in minutes against the hard-packed sand. For that matter, I wasn't exactly happy with the sharp impacts of the *Nereid*'s hull against the ragged tires suspended from the stone pier. But tonight's surf was relatively mild, the sky cloudless, the breeze rolling down warm and fragrant from the island's brushy hills.

"No sign of Torrence yet?" Castillo's uneasy voice came from astern; he was sitting on top of the engine hatch, I could tell by the loom of his slim shape against the phosphorescent surf.

"I don't know. Wait, maybe." Faint smells of ouzo and tobacco were drifting down now on the wind, along with the distant rattle of Mediterranean laughter. Then, dimly against the stars, I caught a glimpse of bodies moving in line—a half-dozen figures threading their way down the cliff path. Torrence must've been drinking with the islanders to seal their bargain.

I wished I had a pair of night glasses; squinting toward the cliff, I thought I could make out Jack Torrence's compact, robust figure striding in the lead. Just how drunk had he gotten, I wondered? Might his easy goodwill toward the Greeks be merely feigned, or a sign of danger? I bent slightly, feeling underneath the bulwark to make sure my automatic was in reach.

"Alonzo, old boy, we've got the goods!" Torrence waved to me with a breezy carelessness I hoped he didn't really feel; then he turned back to his companions, to chatter with them in Greek. They'd stopped at the head of the quay and set down their burdens, apparently reluctant to come too near the launch before securing payment. Further back up the path, a hand-held battery lamp flicked on, flashing first across me and the boat, then lighting up the shore party and the irregular, cloth-wrapped parcels laid on the narrow stone-paved landing. Finally the yellowish beam silhouetted Torrence and followed him as he strode out onto the quay in his rolling, slightly tipsy sailor's gait.

"Give me both bags, it's prime merchandise." He reached down over the side as I handed up the ballasted cloth satchels of currency, the big one and the little one. He took them, and turned back up the pier.

"Jack, tell them to kill that light!" I called after him. Feeling slightly uneasy, I turned to scan the seaward horizon. I saw only the gleam of moonlight on marching waves.

Torrence confronted the islanders across the outspread bundles, holding open the satchels for their inspection. He surrendered the larger bag to the chief Greek, then counted out bills from the smaller one, the glaring light from the cliff still playing down on the transaction. A moment later the islanders, with nods of satisfaction, bent over the parcels by ones and twos and lifted them waist-high, grunting with the effort. They brought the heavy bundles out along the pier, and Castillo and I helped manhandle them down onto the rolling deck, to the accompaniment of scraped knuckles and muffled curses. Torrence watched the loading idly, his hand lingering near the open mouth of the smaller money bag and the revolver we both knew it contained.

Once the last of the Greeks had clambered back onto the pier, Torrence waved them a salute and leaped aboard. "All right, then, cast off!" As I gunned the engine and spun the wheel away to starboard, the islanders scurried to throw off the mooring lines, then stood waving in earnest farewell.

So they were simple island folk after all; I laughed in relief as the breakers began to surge giddily under our keel. Once the big engine developed speed, the pitching steadied to a bone-jarring chop and the pier fell away swiftly behind us. I clapped Torrence on the shoulder as he knelt over the merchandise and waved a high-sign to Castillo in the stern. I turned to the wheel, breathing fine spray, exhilarated by the danger of running at high speed with no lights but the ghostly-dim cockpit dome.

My elation was forgotten as a blinding glare blazed up just ahead, and a loudspeaker barked harshly in Greek for us to heave to.

The spotlight shone from the bridge of a fast-running patrol boat. It loomed so close in front of us that I had to sheer off sharply to avoid a collision, sending Torrence and most of our unbelayed cargo sliding into the scupper. For a moment we took the impacts of the surf on our suddenly overweighted beam, rolling crazily until I corrected our course and reduced speed.

"It's a customs patrol," I called to the others. "They must have seen the lights at the landing! We'd better let them search us."

Torrence was cursing as he wrestled the largest chunk of stone back to the center of the deck and grabbed a coil of rope to lash it in place. "Not on your life," he rasped to me over his shoulder. "We can lose 'em—kick her up to full throttle!"

"Jack, don't be stupid!" I kept the engine cranking just powerfully enough to maintain headway against the swells and steady the yacht. "They probably think we're running drugs . . . or guns for the Cypriot rebels, for god's sake! For a few piddling archaeological relics they won't even bother to impound the boat, if we're lucky!"

"Do as I tell you!" Torrence flashed a savage look to me as he knelt astride the burlap bundle, cinching the ropes tight with white-knuckled fists. "We can't afford to lose this cargo. Get us out of here—now!"

"Aye, Captain, if you say so!" I eased out the throttle steadily, bracing my legs against the intensifying chop. From our port stern quarter, where the patrol vessel had completed a wide turn to intercept us, arc-lamp beams slashed the sky with new urgency, accompanied by a fresh babble of amplified warnings.

It took the larger craft longer to gain speed, so the distance widened rapidly at first. Then, just ahead and to starboard, I saw the top of a wave sliced neatly off. The swell beyond it exploded in a billow of spray, spattering us with brine as we passed under the plume. The slamming concussion of a deck gun was carried sharply to us on the breeze.

"Torrence, this is crazy! They must think we're P.L.O.!"

My protests were blotted out by loud reports from close astern. Backfires, I thought with some confusion—until, looking around, I saw that the Spaniard had taken up the shark rifle from its hiding place under the transom and was emptying it at the pursuing craft.

"Castillo, you fool, hold your fire! That was only a warning shot!" As I watched, the brightest of the spotlights on the Greek ship flared suddenly to darkness, shattered by gunfire. The youth turned and brandished his rifle, warbling a bullfighting cheer.

"Alonzo, stay with the wheel, goddamn it!" Torrence jerked a final half-hitch tight to secure his relic. "We don't dare let 'em catch us now." He arose, stepping astern to take the rifle away from Castillo—but as he reached for it, a stream of yellow sparks raced toward us from the bridge of the distant vessel.

The tracer fire tore into our stern, knocking splinters out of the rail and sending the Spaniard twisting forward on top of the cargo bundles. Torrence threw himself flat against the deck, aided by the boat's dizzy lurch as I wrenched the wheel. As the *Nereid* yawed, I could see and hear the stream of flaring bullets spattering off into the sea to port.

After that, there were more shot-plumes and rattling tracer bursts, but no more hits. The patrol ship couldn't match our speed, and the lack of a spotlight had blinded her. I stayed at the helm, glancing back occasionally to see Torrence kneeling over Castillo, comforting the wounded boy—or was he only checking the stone artifacts for damage? Whatever those bundles contained, I told myself, it'd better be something very special.

The Spaniard never made it to Athens. His body lies somewhere at the bottom of the Mediterranean, weighted down with the corner of an Ionic capital spoiled by thirty-caliber slugs. He lies, perhaps, amid a wrecked shipload of ancient amphorae delicately shaped to carry wine and olive oil, there to be nuzzled in the rippling blue light by disappointed dolphins who will never bear his trim, boyish form across the waves on their backs.

The rest of the cargo fared well, as I learned when we took it to Torrence's wharfside loft in the port of Piraeus. A few bullet-pocks and blood-stains, as Jack said callously to me, might even enhance the shipment's value to jaded collectors—a remark which I found offensive. Our narrow escape, as it turned out, was the subject of yet another bitter quarrel between us, a further instance of his growing recklessness and willfulness—or, in his terms, just another example of the niggling constraints I place on his behavior.

"You can't run a dependable business acting like some crazy Marielito smuggling drugs in Miami, Jack! It could just as well have been you or me who was killed." I was being reckless myself, talking to him that way; but I'd steadied my nerves with gin bitters. "The Spaniard will be hard to replace."

"You really think he will? I don't." His glance at me was openly contemptuous. "Just go trolling the sailors' bars again, the way you generally do when I'm out of town."

"Swine! I certainly will!" I hate to be accused unjustly, and Castillo, though attractive, had never been a lover of mine. But then, Jack has never felt a need to play fair. For instance, he jokingly calls me Alonzo because of my grooming and my obvious worldliness, though my name is really Alan, and I'm from Wapping, south of London. He knows this and holds it over me ruthlessly in our private dealings, caricaturing me as some kind of proper English pansy, which is far from the truth.

"Anyway," I told him, "I don't see what it is about this lot of miserable rubble that makes it worth the poor bastard getting killed."

He looked up from his treasure trove with a flash of irritation that made me thankful I wasn't standing within his reach. "No, you don't see!" he snapped at me. "That's what makes me the dealer in rarities and you the boatboy."

This was the sort of foul temper he'd been inflicting on me more and more lately. But perhaps he was only suffering buyer's remorse, and my remarks about the quality of the goods had rung all too true. It was, after all, a shabby, mixed assortment of relics: damaged stone statuary, architectural fragments and weathered potsherds, all packed carefully by the islanders in old newsprint, fruit crates, and burlap. The dates on the newspapers indicated that the pieces had been garnered over a period of many years—no doubt the richest harvest by far to be had from the poor, depleted soil of a tiny island lost in the southern Cyclades.

There were no forgeries in the lot, I could tell, but few real museum pieces either. The more massive architectural chunks suggested the presence of a temple site somewhere on the island; that might warrant further investigation. But the best piece, the one that had caused the finders to send word out into the dim underworld of art smugglers, had no certain religious provenance.

It was the limbless torso of a life-sized statue—nude and female, possibly an Aphrodite. Its craftsmanship was exquisite, probably dating from the fourth century B.C.—finely polished, the flesh formed of creamy white marble and innocent of any carved drapery. The body contours looked softly naturalistic, shaped in a fluid, lifelike attitude; I could see why Torrence thought the piece had possibilities. He might be thinking of pulling off some marketing coup, such as passing it off as an original Praxiteles. Our fortune would be made, since the legendary sculptor's works are known only from later and probably inferior Roman copies; an original would be of immense value.

But such a ploy was unlikely, since, tragically for this piece, the limbs and head were all broken bluntly off near the trunk. The damage gave the statue a rude look of incompletion, entirely lacking the grace and careful balance of a modern sculpted torso. Viewed intact, the figure might once have approached the sublime, lordly poise of the Belvedere Apollo—but as it lay there in the waterfront loft, prostrate on the rumpled, soiled burlap, it seemed to me little more than a chunk, an amputated specimen salvaged for dull academic autopsy.

Personally, of course, I've always preferred the male Greek statuary because of its heroic proportions and its robust, dynamic energy. The female figures are usually clothed, often aloof or staid-looking—possibly a reflection of the cultural values of the time.

But of course, Jack differed with me on this, as he seemed to do in more and more things lately. I could see that he was fascinated by the statue, hovering over it, adjusting its position on the floor and regarding it intently from every possible angle.

"You see how the artist managed to capture her casual, almost careless motion." He ran his hand demonstratively along the flank of the torso, which curved in a sort of half-twist, probably indicating a seated or bending posture.

"A little chubby for you, isn't she?" I found myself teasing him. The form had that deceptive solidity of the female physique, which can appear plump from some angles and wraith-thin from others simultaneously. It curved down from the swollen convexities of the breasts, through the diaphragm's shaded, interblending hollows, to the hairless but plainly nubile fullness of the groin. The stubs of thighs were raised differentially and slightly parted. I couldn't look at the piece very long before wrenching my eyes away in vague irritation; Torrence, on the other hand, couldn't seem to get his fill of ogling it.

"Here, Jack, watch out!" I moved to help him as he manhandled the heavy fragment upright against one of the crated cornice-pieces. "Be careful, don't rupture yourself!" But to my astonishment, and at considerable risk of injury from the marble mass, he raised an arm to shove me back.

"Keep off! I can manage by myself!" There was a look of deep mistrust in his eyes.

"All right, have it your way. Crazy bugger!" I couldn't imagine just what had needled him so, but I know better than to push Torrence when he's ill-disposed.

As the upshot of it all, I left him that night, saying it would be just for a while, but knowing it might be permanent. I took a room in the Cosmopole Hotel; he was going to go ahead and work his usual contacts to market the goods. They would be fairly lucrative for us, I could tell, and I had no worries about collecting my share. In spite of his faults, Jack always made sure that his business associates got what was coming to them.

It was no great surprise when he called me a few days later, as casually as if nothing had happened between us, and told me he'd found a prospect: Leonard Burlingame, the American collector of antiquities. I arranged to meet them at the loft that evening and keep an eye on things. Not that the fat man seemed particularly dangerous, but I've always backed Torrence on negotiations. When you're dealing in valuable property which you've no legal claim to, you can't very well go running to the police for protection.

I arrived early and waited outside in my Fiat, so I was able to watch the vintage Jaguar drive up and disgorge Leonard Burlingame. The low-slung car bobbed and strained on its springs as it was relieved of the collector's considerable weight. He was made to look even bigger by the tropical sunset that blazed nearly full-sized from his garish Italian sport-shirt. I followed him discreetly up the inside stairway and arrived at the door as Torrence ushered him in, so as to be admitted just after him.

"And so we find—disappointment. More pathetic scrabblings from peasant olive-orchards. Hello, Alan." Burlingame was already roving among the pieces that were too big to be put away out of sight. He flushed slightly, his jowls drooping, as he bent over to examine them, ignoring the false government seals and catalog marks Torrence had dressed them up with. "Hmm. These architectural fragments could possibly lead to something of interest. Where did you say you found them?"

Neither of us volunteered an answer to his leading question, any more than we paid attention to his routine deprecation of the merchandise. Jack was methodically removing drawers full of smaller objects from a wall cabinet and placing them on the dining table. I half-sat on the edge of the littered desk by the door.

"I'm asking two hundred thousand for the collection." Jack lifted some medium-sized pieces from a cabinet and set them out on the felt display cloth. "Dollars, American. As you can see, there are some nice statuettes, here; and the decoration on this kylix is exquisite." He spoke with salesmanlike confidence, flourishing his hand over the dusty, ill-assorted litter of painted potsherds as if the easy magic of his gesture could instantly refashion them into a shapely vase. "Finds like this are getting scarcer every year . . . "

Torrence was interrupted by groaning floor-beams as the fat man strode across the room, moving toward a draped object which stood against the far wall amid household furniture. His fingers swiftly plucked the dark fabric aside to reveal the marble female torso, polished now and paler, supported upright on a rectangular museum pedestal.

"Ah, yes," the collector breathed. He examined the statue silently for a long moment. "With this fragment, your mess of oddities might just warrant six figures." He turned to Torrence, his plump hand lingering on the sculpture's stone flank, which almost glowed in the soft light. "I'll give a hundred and twenty thousand for the lot."

Long experience enabled me to hide my delight at Burlingame's offer and maintain my cynical slouch against the desk, unruffled. But I was less prepared to hide my dismay at Torrence's reply, barked sharply across the room.

"That piece isn't for sale! Just these items over here."

The fat man, visibly annoyed, squared around to face Jack. "What do you mean, not for sale? Have you suddenly gone into art collecting as well as smuggling?" His plump hand hovered on the smooth marble surface, revealing more about his feelings than his quick, beady eyes would ever show. "It's not already sold, is it?" He shot a quick glance back to the torso, his jowls trembling in agitation. "If so, what's it doing here? How much were you offered?"

My own poker face had frozen over again, as I understood the action. I admired Jack's quick thinking; now he would call in the deal at the full two hundred, or even raise his asking price.

But when he answered, his voice had an unbusinesslike edge. "I told you, it's not for sale. Now take your hands off and get away from it!"

"What?" Burlingame squinted, letting his fleshy paw fall from the statue to his side. "What are you trying to pull?" He advanced across the floor, making tremors I could feel where I sat. "Name your price and I'll think about it." His ill temper included a nasty side-glance to me. "Unlike some of us here, I don't like being jacked around!"

"There is no price on that piece." Visibly shrugging aside his anger, Torrence tried to shift smoothly back to earnest salesmanship, jamming the gears a bit as he did so. "Now, if you only want part of the collection, the price I mentioned can be adjusted downward." His attempt at an easy smile nearly succeeded. "Of course, I won't be able to offer you the same volume discount . . . "

"Damn it, I'm not interested in your miserable haggling!" Leonard Burlingame shuffled to a ponderous halt in front of Torrence. "I came here to deal, the same as I always have. If I want to look at pretty statues, I'll go to the Parthenon, not to some faggot fence's loft!" Wheezing out bottomless disgust, he pushed on past Jack toward me and the door, pausing once to grunt over his shoulder, "Don't bother calling me again, unless it's about that torso."

I stood tense as he shambled by, wary of his size, but even more worried about a possible reaction from Jack. My shipmate doesn't like having his sexual habits thrown up in his face; I've seen him provoked to violence by it more than once. This time he only stood frozen-faced as the door thudded shut.

After locking out the heavy sound of the fat man's retreating footsteps, I turned back to Torrence. He was silent, having crossed the room to replace the black drapery over his cherished statue. In view of our special relationship, strained as it had been lately, I dared to vent a little of my own exasperation.

"Really, Jack, I don't understand you! Leonard Burlingame is our best customer! He's no one to fool around with—he could put quite a lot of heat on us with a single phone call!"

"Not without risk to himself." Jack stood watching me put away the specimen drawers. "Anyway, I have my own understanding with the local authorities."

"Yes, so far! But what if that crazy Spaniard killed somebody aboard the revenue boat? Have you thought about that? They could be tracking us down right now." I hefted a foot-long, legless bronze horse and laid it back inside a cabinet. "This merchandise is too dangerous to stockpile very long. If you have a buyer for the torso, we ought to move it out as soon as we can—though I can't imagine who'd pay more for it than Burlingame, the way he was drooling just now . . . "

"Damn it, Alonzo, there is no buyer! And there won't be, not for a while, at least! I intend to keep the statue on hand ... for study." He paced the floor angrily, casting sidelong glances at me like a surly, caged lion. "If you have some objection to that . . . "

"I most certainly do! I didn't get myself shot at just so that you could be proud owner of that buxom piece of bric-a-brac!" I surprised myself with my firmness in confronting him—but at least he was talking to me now, after days of neglect. "We're in business together, remember; that statue belongs to me, too! I can't believe you intend to keep it here just to ogle it . . . "

"Are you trying to hint that I have another deal going on the side?" Torrence regarded me, his face closing off dangerously. "Or that I'm trying to cheat you somehow?"

"No, Jack, of course not!" I moved back against the table, averting my eyes to keep from betraying too much emotion. "I know you're taken with that particular statue; that's obvious." Regaining my poise, I looked straight into his greenish eyes. "It's just that I'm worried about you. You've been taking a lot of chances, and now this." I took a tentative step toward him. "What's bothering you, Jack? Is there anything I can do?"

"No." He shook his head, but he didn't turn from my approach. "I'm just trying to get the measure of that statue—there's something about it." He sighed and walked a few steps across the room, sinking down on his couch of soft, tan leather. "If I even had a clue what it was worth, I'd offer to buy out your share. It could be the real thing, you know—the highest flowering of Grecian classical art!" He glanced to the sculpture where it stood, the soft drapery deeply indented by the figure's cleavage and rumpled by its nether parts. "I'd hate to turn it over to scum like Burlingame, and then live to be told it's even greater than the Hermes, greater than Demeter, greater than anything yet found!" He shook his head in impatient futility. "A goddamned shame it's so smashed up; I'd love to get my hands on the motherless bastard who . . . "

"Come on, Jack, you've never let that worry you before." I sat down on the arm of the sofa beside him, laying a calming hand on his shoulder. "God knows, we've demolished enough art treasures ourselves—like dynamiting those ruins in Tunisia, and throwing whole cargos overboard to prepare for searches . . . "

Torrence shrugged out from under my hand impatiently. "This is different, Alan, don't you see? It could be the find of a lifetime." He shook his head in exasperation. "The damned thing's gotten to me, I admit it. I even have . . .. dreams about it."

I watched him attentively, giving him as much physical comfort as I could without actually embracing him. His anger was almost spent—I'd gone through it many times before, putting up with his whims, his indecision, his sudden, inexplicable rages. It was worth it, I knew, as I admired his clean-shaven good looks, his crewcut blond scalp fringed with golden lamplight.

I think my attraction to Torrence was that he was a real man, tremendously forceful and concentrated in his mind and body—far more so than my gangling, ungainly self. He'd lived through hardships, I knew: his father's violence, his endless troubles with women, and his seagoing adventures; some of it made our recent experiences sound tame.

And of course, the very manliness that made him so alluring also made him dangerous. He had the uneasy volatility of "rough trade," always vulnerable to female as well as male charms, unsure of his own sexuality, and often fiercely resentful of me for trying to force a commitment. If I ever lost him, I knew, it wouldn't be to a man. His uncertainty caused him a lot of pain, and might be the source of the crisis he'd been going through lately. But his suffering didn't have to continue, I told myself; I wanted to heal him, to make it better for him any way I could. So I sat listening without interrupting him as he told me of his dream.

"I'm on one of the southern islands at night, in a Greek temple lit brightly by moonlight. Not a ruin, it's all new-looking—there are painted urns and period furniture set out, and gauzy curtains hanging in some of the archways, fluttering in the night breeze. I'm walking along a corridor, passing one moonlit arch after another. Then I come to the last archway and turn into it. There, lying on a divan in the middle of the room is . . . her, the woman in the sculpture." He looked to the draped torso standing nearby.

"I can recognize her from the shape of her body alone, but her arms and legs and face are perfect, just as beautiful. She's sleeping naked in the moonlight, her coverlet thrown onto the ground because the breeze is so warm, with one arm raised above her head to shade her eyes from the moon. She's not a statue—her abdomen is rising and falling ever so softly as she breathes. Her hair is real—in her groin, and armpits, and on her head, tight curls gathered into a bun at the back, with a few ringlets hanging loose at the side of her face. The moonlight on her skin is almost blinding—God, she's beautiful!

"I reach out and put my hand on the shallow curve of her waist; to my touch it feels warm and silky. She stirs a little and sighs—only a woman can sigh like that, so softly! Then she awakens and opens her eyes.

"Her face is expressionless, and her eyes . . . they're not real. Just dry white surfaces, as if they were filmed over by ancient cataracts, or carved like statues' eyes, out of marble. They're hideous, those two blind, staring stones! She smiles up at me, blindly, it's impossible to tell whether she sees me or not. There's nothing there, no soul . . ." Torrence shook his head, anguish straining his voice and the lines of his face.

"Then I wake up."

He sat there, shaken enough to prove to me that he'd just relived it all. I commiserated with him, trying to draw him out about what I saw as the deeper meaning of the dream, the harm he'd suffered from women, comforting him as best I could. He was more receptive to me than he'd been for a long time, and later that night we renewed our former closeness. It was good again; the next day I got my belongings from the hotel and moved back into Torrence's loft.

Knowing how he felt, I could scarcely tell him how deeply I'd come to resent his infatuation with that hideous statue. It would have been easier for me to take, really, if he'd nailed a poster of a big-breasted female whore on the ceiling over our bed. But I'd surrendered nearly all of my former control over Torrence for the sake of continuing our relationship; I had to be content just to throw the dropcloth back over the disgusting thing whenever he left. For the time being I concentrated on getting him to sell the balance of the artifacts, in the hope that he'd get a sufficiently overwhelming offer for the torso from Leonard Burlingame. It didn't seem to me that he was making much effort to find buyers.

But it was worse than I thought. One sultry autumn evening, he was unusually late getting home. I'd prepared dinner, only to spend an hour or more debating whether to eat my own share on principle and go to bed, or wait up for him. I was beginning to worry that he might've fallen into bad company, with some boozy dockside tart, when I finally heard his footfalls on the stair. He let himself in, followed by a tall, well-dressed Greek male, distinguished-looking, with curly black hair and a graying mustache.

"Alonzo, this is Professor Stavropoulos, Doctor of Antiquities at Athens University. Professor, this is my business associate." Torrence spoke in passable Greek, nodding curtly as he led his guest past me across the room. "Here's the art object I wanted your advice on. It strikes me as having a true classic quality." He smirked slightly to his guest, in credible imitation of a dilettante art-buyer. "I couldn't resist making the investment, but of course, the dealer may have misrepresented it to me."

Turning to the marble hulk with the quite genuine and irritatingly reverent manner he'd acquired, he lifted the drapery.

"Aha." Dr. Stavropoulos finished his somewhat dubious examination of our loft, its contents, and myself, and turned his bushy-browed eyes to the statue. "Hmmm." He squinted, giving it a quick up-and-down appraisal. As I recovered from my shock that Torrence would expose our operation to such a dangerous outsider, I edged closer, unsurprised to find that the professor spoke English more precisely than either of us.

"This is an exquisite example of classical art . . . or it was." The look that Stavropoulos turned on Jack had a probing sharpness in it. "Any fears you may have had were unfounded, Mr. Torrence; you need not have worried over the wisdom of your investment."

Jack was nodding earnestly, his eyes fixed on the statue. "I'd guess the fourth century B.C.E., then. Don't you agree? The dawn of Hellenism, and the highest expression of classical style."

"No doubt." The professor looked from the statue to Torrence with unmistakable skepticism. "Whoever your dealer is, he has . . . unusual resources. I should certainly be acquainted already with this piece; but I do not remember seeing it in the catalogs." Stavropoulos bent to examine the painted markings on the stub-end of a thigh.

"Oh, it wouldn't have come from the mainland." Jack turned his attention back to his guest in an overly casual effort to calm his suspicions. "They told me it was from one of the small islands, I can't recall the name. Of course, in those days the classical influence had spread to every corner of the known world."

"That is true, in part." Stavropoulos's air grew pedagogic. "But Mr. Torrence, you must remember that, by modern standards, the Greek empire was itself practically a wilderness." The professor had turned, facing Jack to dispute some scholarly point that he, presumably, understood. "The remote islands were cut off even more utterly than they are today. They were seen as lands of mystery and danger, peopled by Greeks who spoke different dialects and worshipped bizarre local gods. That is the source of most of the fantastic myth and legendry that has come down to us. For example, it was almost certainly highly developed sculpture like this—" the professor gestured to the torso at his side "—that gave rise to folk tales of gods and enchantresses possessing the power to turn living humans into stone, or to breathe life into statues.

"In a way, that may be the greatest gift the ancient Hellenes left us, greater even than philosophy or mathematics: the notion of humanlike gods, motivated by human desires and shaped in man's image, or vice versa. It took great arrogance for man to conceive of himself as looking like a god. The older, primitive gods tend to have animal shapes and attributes, you know—as in the case of fauns, centaurs, and gorgons, which were demoted by the Greeks to the status of minor sprites, and later by the Christians to devils. The older ideas persisted in Zeus's power to transform himself into an animal, and in the farm animals who watched over the births of Mithra and Christ."

Pausing a moment, Stavropoulos frowned and shook his head with an air of getting back to the business at hand. "Indeed, the past is an endless source of wonder and mystery." He turned his gaze more pointedly at us. "The sad thing is, how rapidly it is being depleted and despoiled in modern times. The great book of the past may soon be completely erased by vandals and archaeological plunderers."

His glance from Torrence to me was sternly accusatory. Although I'd formed no clear notion of what we might do if the situation got out of control, I felt my body tensing instinctively as he continued: "A responsible collector should refuse to do business with shady dealers who lack proper credentials and government certification for their wares, Mr. Torrence. All such dealers should be reported to the authorities."

Precisely what I'd feared; watching the prim, well-dressed academic nervously, I could imagine that he lorded it over a plush suburban villa, three spoiled children, and a plump, dutiful wife. He couldn't possibly have any understanding of the shadow world Jack and I moved in, no inkling of our needs, much less any sympathy for us.

Torrence, though, had failed to meet the professor's eye, conveying a disarming impression of honest embarrassment. "Yes, I suppose I should check my sources more carefully. I'll do it from now on." He flashed an artless smile. "But then, in a case like this, there hasn't been any great harm done. If the piece is genuine, it can still be preserved and documented."

Doctor Stavropoulos snorted, his mustache bristling in a frown of boundless cynicism. "No harm—except that the statue might be intact now if it had been properly excavated and handled."

Torrence stared up expressionlessly at him for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that this damage is recent." Stavropoulos touched two fingers to the stub of a broken marble shoulder. "There is no weathering on these fractures . . . and no patina, see here? The breaks are clean. They were made in modern times, probably by the statue's finders. After all, smaller pieces are easier to smuggle out of the country, where they almost always command higher prices."

"Mother of Christ!" Torrence swung his gaze back to the statue, his face visibly draining of blood. Numb-looking, he sank back onto the arm of the sofa and sat there a long time, his jaw muscles working but without saying anything.

To fill the silence, I volunteered, "I'll get you a drink, Professor." I went feverishly to work at the bar, trying to make trivial conversation with the Greek to distract him from my partner. Both men accepted drinks from me, but Torrence's didn't noticeably improve his condition of stunned self-absorption. In fact, he began muttering disjointed phrases and curses under his breath, obviously building to some kind of outburst.

Stavropoulos was watching him with dismay and suspicion, so I thought it best to escort the professor out of there.

"Your news is quite a shock to my friend," I apologized to him on our way out the door, putting on my best British charm. "He's extremely taken with that statue, as you can see." To smooth things over further, I took him to a cafe to get more ouzo, talked him up for an hour or two and left him climbing tipsily into a streetcar. My devoutest hope was that he would fall into the harbor before reaching home, or else lose all memory of the night's events.

Once I was alone, I stopped for another drink to fortify myself against my impending confrontation. I had to think, and be prepared. Torrence was hard enough to handle in everyday situations, but now he seemed obsessed in a way that was sure to endanger both of us, like a wild west prospector with gold fever. Whether it was due to some mental weakness of his or some strange property of the torso itself, I couldn't decide.

Not that I hadn't heard of it happening before; smugglers and treasure hunters were never the most stable sort of person, and some of the relics they unearth definitely have a haunting aspect. These usually were the ones finally discarded, I'd been told—the anomalies that didn't fit known categories well enough to be catalogued and expensively priced. If a strange metal polyhedron was found in a Mayan tomb, for instance, or a smooth, polished stone mask at a central African site, seeming to defy the styles and technical limitations of the period—how could such an object credibly be merchandised? Without the detailed documentation of an accredited "dig," it might be nearly worthless; yet these were the very discoveries that fascinated their finders, costing them time and money and sometimes their sanity in fruitless quests for their origins.

The broken torso had the look of just such a "graverobber's jinx"; when I thought about it, I realized that it had the timeless, eerie quality of something utterly out-of-place. How, I wondered, could I cope with it and save Torrence from a downward slide? What could I offer him as an alternative?

I decided I already had the answer—love, trust, and support would help him through this crisis, if anything could. I was prepared to give him those things. And so I returned to the loft late that night, to find an unspeakable stench in the air and a dead body on the floor.

The corpse was that of Leonard Burlingame; the fat man had made quite a mess when he died. Apparently it had taken four bullets to stop him, and some of them had ruptured his distended abdomen, releasing not only blood but all the foul-smelling biles and humors collected inside his massive body.

Torrence was blithely ignoring the corpse and its smell, cleaning his gun at our dining table. "The fool tried to shake me down for the Aphrodite, can you believe it? He brought some smart-assed dockside punk with him, and a briefcase with a hundred thousand dollars in it! Or so he claimed—he was dead set on buying the torso from me, whether I wanted to sell it to him or not!" He sat carefully reloading the revolver. "He was getting ugly, so I had to shoot him; his hoodlum got away with the cash." Arising, Torrence stuffed the sanitized revolver in his belt and went to the sink. I stood there, shaking my head.

"Jack, I don't understand this! You turned down a hundred thousand dollars for the statue, and then killed the buyer?" Choking, I managed to resist saying what I really thought, that his actions sounded insane. "Jack, listen to me! We've never been in this deep before; what if his partner goes to the police?"

"Don't worry about that. He's rich now, he'll never blow the whistle." Jack stood at the sink, washing his hands up to the elbows to remove any trace of cordite. "Alonzo, believe me, that amount of money is nothing compared to what this statue is worth!" He nodded to the torso where it stood on its pedestal over Burlingame's body, its ravished, fallen drapery still clutched in the dead man's stubby fingers. "You heard what that professor said—she's the find of the century!"

"Jack, she's damaged goods! You're letting your emotions get the better of you! Who cares that much about a broken chunk of marble?"

Throwing aside his hand towel, he turned to me with a smoldering look. "You heard Stavropoulos, Alan; I was an idiot not to see it myself! Those damned islanders stiffed us, they're the ones who broke up the statue! Once we find the missing parts, we'll be the owners of the most precious art object in the world!"

Confronted by his blazing eyes and clenched jaw, I didn't dare dispute the point. "And how are we going to find the broken pieces?"

Jack was already turning aside from me to rummage in the pantry for a mop and bucket. "By going back to the island. Right now, tonight, once we clean up this putrid garbage! Athens is too hot for us now, anyway!"

And so Leonard Burlingame was the next adventurer to go into the dank shadow-world of the Mediterranean. Undoubtedly he made a rich feast for the crabs and octopi lurking there, if any can still live at the bottom of the murky, oily harbor of Piraeus. At first we feared that his immense body would never sink, that the coping-stones lashed to his neck and ankles were inadequate ballast for his downward voyage. We waited on the wharf, watching the pale ghost of his garish bloodstained shirt float and bob in the water beneath us. Then slowly it receded into blackness. The bursting of a last few, flatulent bubbles told us that the collector was finally gone.

Spurred on by Torrence's restless energy, we prepared to put out to sea before dawn. Not much preparation was needed, since we kept the *Nereid* fueled and provisioned for flight on short notice; it was only a matter of gathering our clothing, weapons, and cash from the loft.

Our greatest disagreement was over Jack's insistence on taking the torso with us. I regarded it as a pointless danger and told him so. "Why should we have to lug this ballast along? It links us to this place and to the killing!"

"I want to be able to verify the broken pieces when we find them," Jack answered, slipping a padded canvas bag over the upright sculpture. "Anyway, Burlingame's thug knows we have it and has some idea of its value. It would hardly be safe to leave it here."

"Do you really think the islanders will simply turn over the missing pieces to us? What if they took them to the mainland and sold them off years ago?"

"Then I'll find out who they sold 'em to, the sons of bitches!" Torrence hefted the bulging duffelbag himself with surprising strength, lurching beneath it unsteadily nevertheless, until I caught him and bore up some of the weight. "I think they were planning to sell her to me piece by piece," he rasped angrily over the statue into my ear, "the way Italian kneecappers do with their hostages! But if they try to gouge me for more money, they've got a surprise coming!"

We transferred our gear to the boat, revved the motor, and cast off. I was emotionally committed to staying with Torrence—and even though my doubts were multiplying by the minute, it would hardly have been safe to try to leave him just then. As we cruised out through languid, oily waters into the shipping channel, I pointed out the rosy tinge in the dawning eastern sky. "If a storm blows up," I told him, "we'll have to make for one of the bigger islands. We'll need a safer harbor than Heksos."

"Not if I can help it. I don't want to be seen and remembered in any of the neighboring ports, in case we run into more trouble on the island." Jack stood at the wheel, his eyes scanning the pale lights of vessels under weigh in the gulf. "We can refuel at Serifos; that'll give us enough range to get in and out of Heksos fast. You go below and sleep until then."

The weather held, but just barely. All day ragged scatterings of cloud gathered overhead and dispersed, darkening to an ominous slate color where they massed thickest. As we took turns tending the wheel in the open half-cabin, stray gusts of wind struck and buffeted at the yacht with contemptuous familiarity. The weather reports didn't exactly warn of a full-blown storm, but there was an unspoken fatalism in their tone that reminded me how treacherous and unpredictable the Mediterranean could be in this season.

Our refueling stop was brief and businesslike, but the detour carried us into a headwind. By midafternoon, cruising in the teeth of whitecaps and windborne spray, I was begging Torrence to turn back to Serifos, but he wouldn't hear of it. He hardly rested, staying doggedly at the wheel or else loitering by my side to keep me from changing course during my watches. As the sky darkened with overcast and gathering dusk, he sat against the motor housing near the canvas-bundled statue we'd lashed amidships, keeping his hand near his coat pocket, which sagged with the weight of a gun.

Too late I understood that good seamanship, sound business sense, even long, close friendship didn't matter any more. It was obsession time, purely a case of Jack's fixation on that disfigured torso and whatever it meant in the shadowy depths of his mind. He'd resolved to own it, and he would throw both our lives away to find its missing parts, for what inner reason I couldn't guess. Perhaps the sculpture had some psychological meaning for him, a prop to his fiercely guarded manhood. Perhaps he even deluded himself that he could summon it to mystical life, Pygmalion-like; God knew he'd hinted to me of just such fantasies when he'd awakened on recent nights, tense and sweating from morbid dreams.

Whatever the secret of Torrence's fixation, it obviously tapped into deep reserves of reckless violence in his nature. If I gave him any cause, that destructive force could easily be unleashed against me. There was no way to stop him short of killing or crippling him, and that I could never bring myself to do.

So, as murky twilight deepened to night, I drove the *Nereid* through mounting surf into the cove on the western side of the isle of Heksos. A foolhardy move; but then, the yacht and her crew had suffered much ill luck lately. Mindful of the buxom bundle lashed to our deck, I couldn't help recalling the ancient seafaring prohibition against carrying women on shipboard.

Once inside the bay, we found the shelving water more turbulent than the open sea and far choppier than during our previous visit. It was no easy task to maneuver the small craft alongside the battered quay. "We'd better find out what we need to know tonight," I told Torrence as he hauled the slack out of the mooring line, "so we can get out of here and find a decent harbor before the weather breaks. Better to risk a storm out in the middle of the Med than in this surf. Our anchor could never hold."

"Fine," Torrence said absently, with the air of someone slightly out of touch with reality. "I know my way around the island, so you can stay here with the boat; make sure it doesn't pound itself to bits against this pier." To my surprise, I saw that he was wrestling the tote-goat out of the equipment locker. The battered mini-cycle with its stubby wheels, one-cylinder engine, and low-slung luggage rack had proven useful on past occasions for transporting loads to the boat from points inland. It was light enough for him to lift overside onto the quay by himself, and he did so.

"You're planning to bring back more chunks of the statue tonight with that thing?" I asked him.

"Could be." He turned to the lashings of the main fragment on deck. "Right now, I need it to take the Aphrodite along with me."

"What? Are you insane?" His sudden glare silenced me, until I was able to ask more reasonably, "Jack, what could you possibly want with that relic on the island? You're in more danger of losing it there . . . "

I fell silent, realizing that my words meant no more to him than the spatter of raindrops that was passing across the deck just then. His obsession still ruled him, with reason playing little or no part. Quite likely, I told myself, he didn't trust me alone with the statue. Or *it* alone with *me*, perhaps . . . ? A strange notion, one that proved just how little I understood my friend's interior workings.

"All right, then take it." Mindful of the brisk weather rolling in over the bow, I bent to the lashings to hurry Torrence along.

Later I kept busy shifting frayed, water-filled tires along the rusty cable that ringed the quay, lashing them in place to protect the *Nereid's* hull as best I could. I checked the boat's storm seals and bilge pumps, tasks which became more significant as night deepened. The waves surged higher, the wind veered westerly and new rain squalls pattered overhead.

Even though the radio reports from Athens remained noncommittal, I could scarcely doubt the obvious local signs. A terrific blow was in store, in fact almost upon us. With conditions worsening, I couldn't wait; it wasn't more than an hour after I heard the motorbike laboring out of earshot around the curves of the cliff path that I set out on its trail, looking for Torrence.

Of course, I could have taken the boat out to sea myself in the hope of saving it. It might have been possible to reach Milos alone, even Naxos with luck. After the storm I could return to get Jack, if I dared, and explain that I'd only been protecting our sizable investment in the yacht . . . if he was still alive by then. But I feared for his safety here among the islanders in his unstable mental state.

If others could have obsessions, I decided, then so could I; mine was Torrence. My feelings for him were all the stronger now that they'd been challenged by some unknown, insidious force. Statue or no statue, I couldn't put to sea without him. I set off up the trail at a jog, leaving the *Nereid* straining and wallowing at the end of her cruelly short tether. I knew I might not get back to her in time, if at all.

The path was gradual, worn deep into pale, rocky earth by centuries of sandals and bare, rough soles. It wound past bowers and lookouts that might have been lovely if not shrouded by night and harsh weather. Grass and low shrubs shivered damply in the breeze, while cypresses moved uneasily at the top of the path. Here and there my electric torch lit up rain-spattered sections of the tote-goat's track, proving I was headed the right way.

The tire tracks skirted a cluster of farm cottages at the clifftop, veering to one side across a shallow drainage ditch. I followed, panting from the swift climb, wondering whether the sound of the passing motorcycle had alerted the islanders. The sighing of wind in the cypress boughs may have been enough to mask the noise from listening ears. A dog began to bark monotonously, and I thought I heard other stirrings, but no light shone from the hamlet. I screened my own torch, keeping it pointed away from the huts looming silently there in the dark.

A cautious dozen meters beyond the town, I found myself on a wide track that seemed to angle inland from the coast. I resumed my jogging pace, slowing at places where I thought Torrence might have turned off onto trails or rocky meadows beside the road. But the scooter, burdened with the marble torso, had left deep impressions to guide me forward.

As I went, my mind worked furiously. This night-quest was still a mad riddle to me, and yet I thought I could begin to see the shadowy outlines of Torrence's compulsion. The stone statue seemed to appeal to his repressed drives, whether they were basically sexual ones or mother-related yearnings. Like a lamia, the demoness of ancient myth, the torso seemed to have an uncanny ability to prey on men—but only on those who had been sexually weakened. Hence the uncontrollable lust it had aroused in Leonard Burlingame; the collector, trapped and thwarted inside the ponderous shell of himself, saw in the truncated statue a safe object for his desires, a crude female thing he could possess and love better than any living woman. Torrence, on the other hand, seemed to see in it a hope of redemption, a last chance to prove his maleness and escape the sexual underworld that I knew his life with me represented to him. Maybe, in trying to piece the statue back together, he was really seeking to reassemble the fragments of his own shattered life. I could sympathize with him, but at the same time I could see the danger his obsession posed, both to himself and to anyone who happened to get in his way.

Blown along by the tempest, I walked and ran a full kilometer before the road ended at another stone cottage, huddled pale against a hillside terraced with grapestocks and olive trees. Coming to a gasping halt, I thought I could see yellow light wavering in the curtained front window. A sharp, intermittent sound came to my ears: the cottage door banging open and shut in the gusting wind.

Flashing my light around the farmstead, I saw no sign of Torrence or his scooter, although the tire tracks seemed to lead straight to the house. Striving to quiet my laboring breath, I pocketed my torch, crept silently up to the dim-lit doorway, and looked in. A moment later I slipped inside and bolted the door behind me.

The figure on the floor wasn't Torrence, I could see as I rolled him over. He was an elderly Greek, bronze-skinned and bushy-haired in the kerosene lamplight, possibly one of the men who had come down to the boat on our previous trip. But his face was badly swollen from a beating, and his heroic nose was stained wetly with blood. He was in bad shape, his breath coming in weak gasps, shirt torn open at the front to reveal red welts on his chest. These, I realized with a queasy shock, were burns from the wood stove glowing in the corner; the old man had not only been beaten, he'd been tortured.

I eased a chair-cushion beneath his head; then I brought a towel and a pitcher of water from the pantry to revive him. At first he was insensible to the touch of the damp cloth; then he moaned and struggled, awakening directly from oblivion to panic. Finally I splashed some of the water between his lips and managed to calm him, cradling his quaking shoulders. I asked him in Greek where the American had gone.

"The American, yes." For the first time his eye, the one that wasn't swollen shut, focused on me with a look of recognition. "Your friend, Jack . . . a bad man, very bad . . . I warn him, I not show him the place. It is sacred to the old ways . . . the power still too strong . . . " his gaze faltered away from mine as he sagged toward unconsciousness.

I shook him, asking again where Torrence was, a cold, tight part of my brain wondering if I'd have to resort to the hot stove myself. But he fought his way back to awareness, his feeble mutterings taking on more urgency. "The statue, he brought it back! We don't want it, too much danger . . . you stop him. No man should lose his soul." The islander's head thrashed from side to side in my arms. "He don't know the power of the spell . . . warn him, do not let him . . . " I leaned my ear close against his bruised lips as he rambled on, giving me the directions Torrence had already wrung out of him. I demanded clarifications, making him repeat his faint answers until I was satisfied. Then, dragging him into the back room and hoisting him up onto his bed, I left him as comfortable as I could.

Outside a half-gale was blowing, hurling volleys of rain against the western slope of the island. The storm had finally come, heralded by a low, intermittent tremor of thunder to seaward. I hitched up my collar and set out, saying a silent prayer for the *Nereid* and for ourselves. With the wind like this, it might already be too late to escape the breakers at the mouth of the cove.

I walked around the cottage and started climbing the terraced hillside. Striding with the wind at my back, I was able to mount straight up the rock-walled terraces instead of following the staggered series of ramps that Torrence must have used. Branches lashed wildly in the dark, and dried olives rolled treacherously underfoot. I ran onward into the rain-sleeted beam of my torch, with occasional flashes of lightning over the slate-dark sea helping me keep my bearings.

At the top of the orchard the slope grew steeper and rockier; but as the old Greek had promised, a path led off to one side along an upward-trending crevice of land. In time this deepened into a ravine, as I saw when a nearby lightning stroke revealed rock walls beetling over me on either hand. Wheel-sized furrows imprinted in the windblown weeds assured me that I was still following Torrence, though in my breathless haste I would have missed any smaller sign. At one point, I thought I heard the nasal roar of the scooter echoing in the gorge ahead; but it may only have been the wind soughing over jagged cliffs, or my own breath laboring in my throat.

As the path sought out the heights, I continued thinking about Torrence and what I could say when I found him. I puzzled over the breaking up of the statue; the old man's warnings had been vague and incoherent, yet they seemed to imply that the relic had been disfigured not for the sake of smuggling or a more profitable sale, but because of the dreaded power of the goddess; obviously she still had power, if only over the islanders' superstitious minds. I wondered what eerie charm or stunning beauty the statue might manifest in its whole form and, more important, what effect it would have on Torrence's uneasy mental balance.

All at once the trail grew level, and the sky opened out above me. Not that I could see it; rather I could sense it, a starless, invisible chaos of wind and rain swirling overhead. I knew I was approaching an eminence, probably the central spine of Heksos. Gradually the trees and rocks retreated from the path on either side, and dim sky-flickerings revealed the opening of a glade or natural amphitheater amid steep slopes. Walking forward, I discerned a yellow, stationary glow through the stunted trees that I quickly recognized as Torrence's bike headlamp.

"Jack! It's me, Alan! Are you there?"

As I walked forward, weak with exertion and staggered by the driving force of wind and rain, I could make out a scatter of white marble stones ahead. A few stubs of standing columns jutted like undershot fangs at the mouth of a cave or spring set deep in the hillside. The ruined shrine lay against the base of the hill, with scrub trees and drooping vines rooted here and there in the rocky soil above it.

There also appeared to be a dark-clad human figure stooping there. And yes, it was Torrence; I saw his square shoulder and crewcut spotlighted as he leaned near the beam of the scooter headlamp. The light shone steadily on the undraped marble torso lying recumbent in the rain, glistening as damply white as the skin of any virgin pinioned for sacrifice on a heathen altar. Jack labored over the torso, dragging other stones into place. Long, thin pieces, not really visible in the rain-dimmed light . . . the missing limbs? I hurried forward across a low knoll for a clearer view, just as Torrence bent down to make some final adjustments.

"Jack, I'm here! Be careful . . . " I could hardly hear my own cries in the peaking storm.

"Keep away!" Torrence must have heard me, for he yelled back, glancing over his shoulder. "Alan, get out of here! I don't need you . . . " His voice dwindled to inaudibility as he turned back to the statue outspread before him.

What I saw then can never be a certainty, because of the tremendous lightning bolt that struck the hillside at that moment, and its aftermath. The islanders believed my story the next morning, treating me with sympathy and a little awe when they found me wandering like a god-struck hermit; but I myself don't know what to believe. I was knocked flat by the thunderbolt, temporarily blinded, my eyebrows scorched away by its heat; yet the same divine energy that burned out my vision may first have distorted it, or else momentarily heightened it . . .

In any case, the scene is permanently imprinted on my brain, a vivid, electrified tableau, the first image I see whenever I close my eyes and probably the last thing I will see in this life: Torrence kneeling at the ruined shrine, bending over the object of his obsession, his love . . . is he really transformed into pale stone, or just frozen in shock? And the shapely, intact goddess beneath him, sculpted of holy fire . . . can she truly be reaching up to enfold him in a lithe, living embrace?

The smallest details are the most vivid ones, just before the hillside comes thundering down to bury Jack Torrence and the object of his passion under thousands of tons of ancient stone: the long, snakelike tentacles of her arms, the twitching palps of her feet and the tendriled horror of her face, gaping in a tooth-rimmed snarl alien to humanity and immeasurably older than the gods of Greece. ●

An exotic "Outpost of the Empire" is the setting for Robert Silverberg's latest tale of a richly divergent time-line. Mr. Silverberg delves into some of the background for this story in his afterword on p. 199.

AN OUTPOST OF THE EMPIRE

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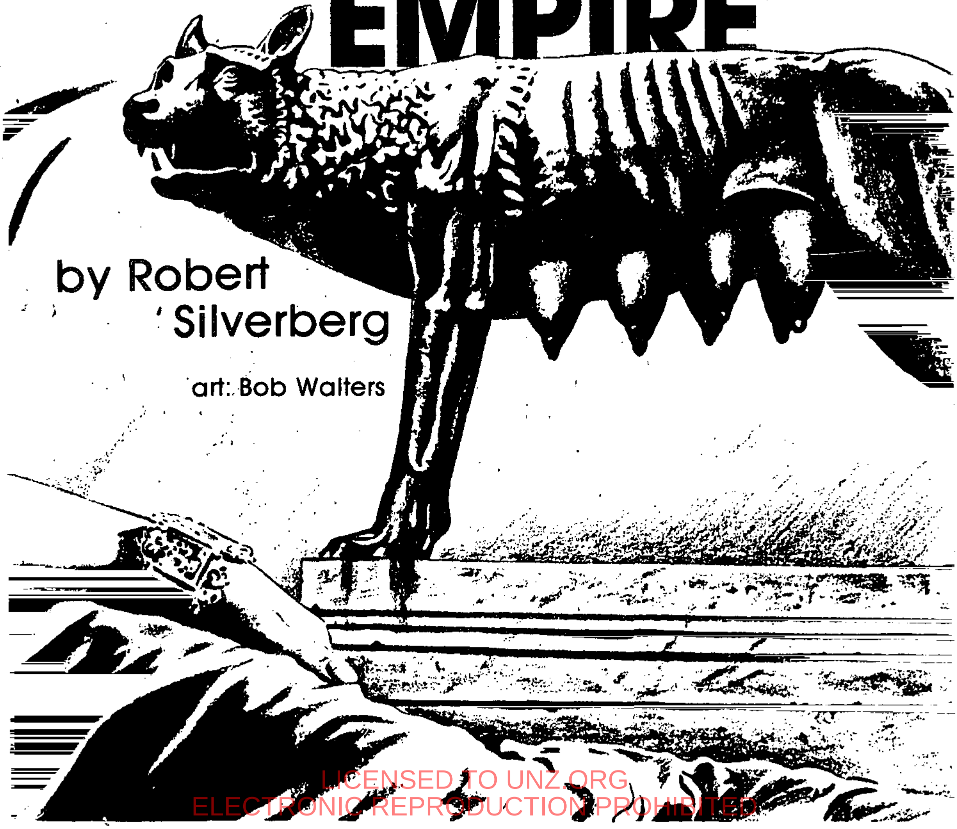


by Robert Silverberg

art: Bob Walters

You know your enemy from the first moment you see him. I saw mine on a gleaming spring day almost a year ago, when I had gone down to the Grand Canal as I usually do in the morning to enjoy the breezes. A flotilla of ornate Roman barges was moving along the water, shouldering our gondolas aside as though they were so much flotsam. In the prow of the foremost barge stood a sturdy dark-bearded young imperial proconsul, grinning in the morning sunshine, looking for all the world like some new Alexander taking possession of his most recently conquered domain.

I was watching from the steps of the little Temple of Apollo, just by the Rialto. The proconsul's barge bore three poles from which the eagle-standard fluttered, and they were too tall to pass. The drawbridge, for some reason, was slow to open. As he looked impatiently around his gaze fell on me and his bright, insolent eyes met mine. They rested there a moment, comfortably, presumptuously. Then he winked and waved, and cupped his hand to his lips and called something to me that I could not make out.

"What?" I said automatically, speaking in Greek.

"Falco! Quintus Pompeius Falco!"

Then the bridge opened and his barge passed through and was gone, swiftly heading down the canal. His destination, I soon would learn, was the Palace of the Doges on the great plaza, where he was going to take up residence in the house where the princes of Venetia formerly had dwelled.

I glanced at Sophia, my waiting-maid. "Did you hear him?" I asked. "What was that he said?"

"His name, lady. He is Pompeius Falco, our new master."

"Ah. Of course. Our new master."

How I hated him in that first moment! This hairy-faced garlic-eating Italian boy, making his swaggering way into our serene and lovely city to be our overlord—how could I not detest him? Some crude soldier from Neapolis or Calabria, jumped up out of sweaty obscurity to become proconsul of Venetia as a reward, no doubt, for his bloodthirstiness on the battlefield, who now would fill our ears with his grating Latin crudities and desecrate the elegance of our banquets with his coarse Roman ways—I loathed him on sight. I felt soiled by the cool, casual glance he had bestowed on me in that moment before his barge passed under the drawbridge. Quintus Pompeius Falco, indeed! What could that ugly name possibly mean to me? I, a highborn woman of Venetia, Byzantine to the core, who could trace her ancestry to the princes of Constantinopolis, who had mingled since childhood with the great ones of the Greek world?

It was no surprise that the Romans were here. For months I had felt the Empire seeping into our city the way the bitter ocean tides slip past our barrier islands into our quiet lagoon. That is the way it is in Venetia: we shelter ourselves as best we can from the sea, but in time of storm it prevails over everything and comes surging in upon us, engulfing us and flooding us. There is no sea in all the world more powerful than the Empire of Roma; and now it was about to sweep over us at last.

We were a defeated race, after all. Five, eight, ten years had passed, already, since the Basileus Leo VII and the Emperor Flavius Romulus had signed the Treaty of Ravenna by which the Eastern and Western Empires were reunited under Roman rule and all was as it had been so many centuries ago in the time of the earliest Caesars. The great Greek moment was over. We had had our time of glory, but the Romans had prevailed in the end. Piece by piece the whole independent Byzantine world had returned to Roman control, and it was our turn now, Venetia, the westernmost outpost of the fallen realm. Roman barges sailed our canals. A Roman proconsul had come here to live in the Palace of the Doges. Roman soldiers strutted in our streets. Fifty years of bloody civil war, two hundred years of Greek ascendancy after that, and now it was all nothing but history. We did not even have an emperor of our own. For a thousand years, since the time of Constantine, we of the East had had that. But now we would have to bend our knees to the Caesars as we did in ancient times. Do you wonder that I hated Caesar's man on sight, as he proudly made his entry into our conquered but not humbled city?

Scarcely anything changed at first. They did not reconsecrate the Temple of Zeus as a temple of Jupiter. Our fine Byzantine coins, our solidi and miliaresia, continued to circulate, though I suppose there were Roman sestertii and denarii among them now. We spoke the language we had always spoken. Official documents now bore the Roman date—it was their year 2206—instead of using the Greek numbering, which ran from the founding of Constantinopolis. But who among us paid attention to official documents? For us it was still the year 1123.

We saw Roman officials occasionally in the plaza, or in the shops of the Rialto, or journeying in gondolas of state along the main canals, but they were few in number and they seemed to take care not to intrude on our lives. The great men of the city, the members of the old aristocracy from whose ranks the Doges once had been drawn, went about in proper pomp and majesty as usual. There was no Doge, of course, but there had been none for a long time.

My own existence was as it had been. As the daughter of Alexios Phokas and the widow of Heraclios Cantacuzenos I had wealth and privilege. My palace on the Grand Canal was a center for the high-born and cultured. My estate to the east in warm and golden Istria yielded a rich bounty of figs, olives, oats, and wheat, and afforded me a place of diversion when I wearied of the watery charms of Venetia. For much as I love Venetia I find the city's dank winters and sweltering miasmic summers very much of a burden on my spirit, and must escape from it when those times come.

I had my lovers and my suitors, who were not necessarily the same men. It was generally assumed that I would marry again: I was still only thirty, childless and wealthy and widely hailed for my beauty, and of high family with close connection to the Byzantine imperial dynasty. But although my mourning time was over, I was in no hurry for a new husband. I had been too young when I was married to Heraclios, and had had insufficient experience of the world. The accident that had robbed me of my lord so early had given me the opportunity to make up for my past innocence, and so I had done. Like Penelope, I surrounded myself with suitors who would gladly have taken a daughter of the Phokases to wife, widow that she might be. But while these ambitious grandees, most of them ten years older than I or more, buzzed about me bringing their gifts and murmuring their promises, I amused myself with a succession of less distinguished gentlemen of greater vigor—gondoliers, grooms, musicians, a soldier or two—to the great enhancement of my knowledge of life.

I suppose it was inevitable that I would encounter the Roman proconsul sooner or later. Venetia is a small city; and it was incumbent upon him to ingratiate himself with the local aristocracy. For our part we were obliged to be civil with him: among the Romans all benefits flow downward from the top, and he was the Emperor's man in Venetia. When lands, military rank, lucrative municipal offices became available, it was Quintus Pompeius Falco who would distribute them, and he could, if he chose, ignore the formerly mighty of the city and raise new men to favor. So it behooved those who had been powerful under the fallen government to court him if they hoped to maintain their high positions. Falco had his suitors just as I had mine. On feast days he was seen at the Temple of Zeus, surrounded by Venetian lords who fawned on him as though he were Zeus himself come to visit. He had the place of honor at many banquets; he was invited to join in the hunt at the estates of the great noblemen; often, as the barges of the wealthy traveled down our canals, there was Pompeius Falco among them on deck, laughing and sipping wine and accepting the flattery of his hosts.

As I say, I could not help but encounter him eventually. From time to time I saw him eyeing me from afar at some grand occasion of state; but I never gave him the satisfaction of returning his glance. And then came an evening when I could no longer avoid direct contact with him.

It was a banquet at the villa of my father's younger brother, Demetrios.

With my father dead, Demetrios was the head of our family, and his invitation had the power of a command. What I did not know was that Demetrios, for all his sacks of gold and his many estates in the hinterland, was angling for a political post in the new Roman administration. He wished to become Master of the Cavalry, not a military position at all, for what sort of cavalry could seaborne Venetia have, but simply a sinecure that would entitle him to a share of the city's customs revenues. Therefore he was cultivating the friendship of Pompeius Falco, and had invited him to the banquet. And, to my horror, he had seated me at the proconsul's right hand at the dinner table. Was my uncle willing to play the pimp for the sake of gaining a few extra ducats a year? So it would appear. I was ablaze with fury. But there was nothing I could do now except go through with my part. I had no wish to cause a scandal in my uncle's house.

Falco said to me, "We are companions this evening, it would seem. May I escort you to your seat, Lady Eudoxia?"

He spoke in Greek; and accurate Greek at that, though there was a thick-tongued barbarian undercurrent to his speech. I took his arm. He was taller than I had expected, and very broad through the shoulders. His eyes were alert and penetrating and his smile was a quick, forceful one. From a distance he had seemed quite boyish but I saw now that he was older than I had thought, at least thirty-five, perhaps even more. I detested him for his easy, confident manner, for his proprietorial air, for his command of our language. I even detested him for his beard, thick and black: beards had not been in fashion in the Greek world for several generations now. His was a short, dense fringe, a soldier's beard, that gave him the look of an emperor on one of the old Roman coins. Very likely that was its purpose.

Platters of grilled fish came, and cool wine to go with it. "I love your Venetian wine," he said. "So much more delicate than the heavy stuff of the south. Shall I pour, lady?"

There were servants standing around to do the pouring. But the proconsul of Venetia poured my wine for me, and everyone in the room noticed it.

I was the dutiful niece. I made amiable conversation, as though Pompeius Falco were a mere guest and not the agent of our conqueror; I pretended that I had utterly accepted the fall of Byzantium and the presence of Roman functionaries among us. Where was he from? Tarraco, he said. That was a city far in the west, he explained: in Hispania. The Emperor Flavius Romulus was from Tarraco also. Ah, and was he related to the Emperor, then? No, said Falco, not at all. But he was a close friend of the Emperor's youngest son, Marcus Quintillius. They had fought side by side in the Cappadocian campaign.

"And are you pleased to have been posted to Venetia?" I asked him, as the wine came around again.

"Oh, yes, yes, lady, very much. What a beautiful little city! So unusual: all these canals, all these bridges. And how civilized it is here, after the frenzy and clamor of Rome."

"Indeed, we are quite civilized," I said.

But I was boiling within, for I knew what he really meant, which was, *How quaint your Venetia is, how sweet, a precious little bauble of a place. And how clever it was of you to build your pretty little town in the sea as you did, so that all the streets are canals and one must get about by gondola instead of by carriage. And what a relief it is for me to spend some time in a placid provincial backwater like this, sipping good wine with handsome ladies while all the local lordlings scurry around me desperately trying to curry my favor, instead of my having to make my way in the cutthroat jungle that surrounds the imperial court in Rome.* And as he went on praising the beauties of the city I came to hate him more and more. It is one thing to be conquered, and quite another to be patronized.

I knew he intended to seduce me. One didn't need the wisdom of Minerva to see that. But I resolved then and there to seduce him first: to seize such little control as I could over this Roman, to humble him and thus to defeat him. Falco was an attractive enough animal, of course. On a sheer animal level there surely was pleasure to be had from him. And also the other pleasure of the conqueror conquered, the pursuer made the pursued: yes. I was eager for that. I was no longer the innocent of seventeen who had been given as bride to the radiant Heraclios Cantacuzenos. I had wiles, now. I was a woman, not a child.

I shifted the conversation to the arts, to literature, to philosophy, to history. I wanted to show him up as the barbarian he was; but he turned out to be unexpectedly well educated, and when I asked if he had been to the theater to see the current play, which was the *Nausicaa* of Sophocles, he said that he had, but that his favorite play of Sophocles was the *Philoctetes*, because it so well defined the conflict between honor and patriotism. "And yet, Lady Eudoxia, I can see why you are partial to the *Nausicaa*, for surely that kind princess must be a woman close to your heart." More flattery, and I loathed him for it; but in truth I had wept at the theater when Nausicaa and Odysseus had loved and parted, and perhaps I did see something of her in myself, or something of myself in her.

At the evening's end he asked me to take the midday meal with him at his palace two days hence. I was prepared for that, and coolly begged a prior engagement. He proposed dinner, then, the first of the week following. Again I invented a reason for declining. He smiled. He understood the nature of the game we had entered into.

"Perhaps another time, then," he said, and gracefully left me for my uncle's company.

I meant to see him again, of course, but at a time and a place of my own choosing. And soon I found the occasion. When traveling troupes of musicians reach Venetia, they find a ready welcome at my home. A concert was to be held; I invited the proconsul. He came, accompanied by a stolid Roman retinue. I gave him the place of honor, naturally. Falco lingered after the performance to praise the quality of the flutes and the poignance of the singer; but he said nothing further about my joining him for dinner. Good: he had abdicated in my favor. From this point on I would define the nature of the chase. I offered him no further invitations either, but allowed him a brief tour of the downstairs rooms of my palace before he left, and he admired the paintings, the sculptures, the cabinet of antiquities, all the fine things that I had inherited from my father and my grandfather.

The next day a Roman soldier arrived with a gift for me from the proconsul: a little statuette in highly polished black stone, showing a woman with the head of a cat. The note from Falco that accompanied it said that he had obtained it while serving in the province of Aiguptos some years ago: it was an image of one of the Aiguptian gods, which he had purchased at a temple in Memphis, and he thought I might find some beauty in it. Indeed it was beautiful, after a fashion, but also it was frightening and strange. In that way it was very much like Quintus Pompeius Falco, I found myself thinking, to my own great surprise. I put the statuette on a shelf in my cabinet—there was nothing like it there; I had never seen anything of its kind—and I resolved to ask Falco to tell me something of Aiguptos the next time I saw him, of its pyramids, its bizarre gods, its torrid sandy wastes..

I sent him a brief note of thanks. Then I waited seven days, and invited him to join me for a holiday at my Istrian estate the following week.

Unfortunately, he replied, that week the cousin of Caesar would be passing through Venetia and would have to be entertained. Could he visit my estate another time?

The rejection caught me off guard. He was a better player of the game than I had suspected; I broke into hot tears of rage. But I had enough sense not to answer immediately. After three days I wrote again, telling him that I regretted being unable to offer him an alternate date at present, but perhaps I would find myself free to entertain him later in the season. It was a risky ploy: certainly it jeopardized my uncle's ambitions. But Falco seemingly took no offense. When our gondolas passed on the canal two days later, he bowed grandly to me and smiled.

I waited what seemed to be the right span of time, and invited him again; and this time he accepted. A ten-man bodyguard came with him: did he think I meant to murder him? But of course the Empire must proclaim its power at every opportunity. I had been warned he would bring an entourage, and I was prepared for it, lodging his soldiers in distant outbuildings and sending for girls of the village to amuse and distract them. Falco himself I installed in the guest suite of my own dwelling.

He had another gift for me: a necklace made from beads of some strange green stone, carved in curious patterns, with a blood-red wedge of stone at its center.

"How lovely," I said, though I thought it frightening and harsh.

"It comes from the land of Mexico," he told me. "Which is a great kingdom in Nova Roma, far across the sea. They worship mysterious gods there. Their festivals are held atop a great pyramid, where priests cut out the hearts of sacrificial victims until rivers of blood run in the streets of the city."

"And you have been there?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Six years past. Mexico and another land called Peru. I was in the service of Caesar's ambassador to the kingdoms of Nova Roma then."

It stunned me to think that this man had been to Nova Roma. Those two great continents far across the Western Sea—they seemed as remote as the face of the moon to me. But of course in this great time of the Empire under Flavius Romulus the Romans have carried their banners to the most remote parts of the world.

I stroked the stone beads—the green stone was smooth as silk, and seemed to burn with an inner fire—and put the necklace on.

"Aiguptos—Nova Roma—" I shook my head. "And have you been everywhere, then?"

"Yes, very nearly so," he said, laughing. "The men who serve Flavius Caesar grow accustomed to long journeys. My brother has been to Khitai and the islands of Cipangu. My uncle went far south in Africa, beyond Aiguptos, to the lands where the hairy men dwell. It is a golden age, lady. The Empire reaches out boldly to every corner of the world." Then he smiled and leaned close and said, "And you, lady? Have you traveled very much?"

"I have seen Constantinopolis," I said.

"Ah. The great capital, yes. I stopped there on my way to Aiguptos. The races in the Hippodrome—nothing like it, even in Urbs Roma itself! I saw the royal palace: from the outside, of course. They say it has walls of gold. I think not even Caesar's house can equal it."

"I was in it, once, when I was a child. When the Basileus still ruled, I mean. I saw the golden halls. I saw the lions of gold that sit beside the throne and roar and wave their tails, and the jewelled birds on the gold and silver trees in the throne-chamber, who open their beaks and sing. The Basileus gave me a ring. My father was his distant relative, you know. I am of the Phokas family. Later I married a Cantacuzenos: my husband too had royal connections."

"Ah," he said, as though greatly impressed, as though the names of the Byzantine aristocracy might possibly mean something to him.

But in fact I knew he was still condescending to me. A dethroned emperor is no emperor at all; a fallen aristocracy merits little awe.

And what did it matter to him that I had been once to Constantinopolis—he who had been there too, in passing, on his way to fabulous Aiguptos? The one great journey I had taken in my life was a mere stopover to him. His cosmopolitanism humbled me, as I suppose it was meant to do. He had been to other continents: other worlds, really. Aiguptos! Nova Roma! He could find things to praise about our capital, yes, but it was clear from his effusive tone that he really regarded it as inferior to the city of Rome, and inferior perhaps to the cities of Mexico and Peru as well, and other exotic places that he had visited in Caesar's name. The breadth and scope of his travels dazzled me. Here we Greeks were, penned up in our ever-shrinking realm that now had collapsed utterly. Here was I, daughter of one minor city on the periphery of that fallen realm, pathetically proud of my one visit long ago to our formerly mighty capital. But he was a Roman; all the world was open to him. If mighty Constantinopolis of the golden walls was just one more city to him, what was our little Venetia? What was I?

I hated him more violently than ever. I wished I had never invited him.

But he was my guest. I had had a wondrous banquet prepared, with the finest of wines, and delicacies that even a far-traveled Roman might not have met with before. He was obviously pleased. He drank and drank and drank, growing flushed though never losing control, and we talked far into the night.

I must confess that he amazed me with the scope and range of his mind.

He was no mere barbarian. He had had a Greek tutor, as all Romans of good family had had for over a thousand years. A wise old Athenian named Eukleides, he was, who had filled the young Falco's head with poetry and drama and philosophy, and drilled him in the most obscure nuances of our language, and taught him the abstract sciences, at which we Greeks have always excelled. And so this proconsul was at home not just in Roman things like science and engineering and the art of warfare, but also in Plato and Aristoteles, in the playwrights and poets, in the history of my race back to Agamemnon's time—indeed, he was able to discourse on all manner of things that I myself knew more by name than by their inner meaning.

He talked until I had had all the talking I could bear, and then some. And at last—it was the middle hour of the night, and the owls were crying in the darkness—I took him by the hand and led him to my bed, if only to silence that flow of words that came from him like the torrents of Aiguptos's Nile itself.

He lit a taper in the bedchamber. Our clothes dropped away as though they had turned to mist.

He reached for me and drew me down.

I had never been loved by a Roman before. In the last moment before he embraced me I had a sudden fresh burst of fiery contempt for him and all his kind, for I was certain that his innate brutality now would come to the fore, that all his philosophic eloquence had been but a pose and now he would take possession of me the way Romans for fifteen hundred years had taken possession of everything in their path. He would subjugate me; he would colonize me. He would be coarse and violent and clumsy, but he would have his way, as Romans always did, and afterward he would rise and leave without a word.

I was wrong, as I had been wrong about everything else concerning this man.

His touch indeed was Roman, not Greek. That is to say, instead of insinuating himself into me in some devious, cunning, left-handed manner, he was straightforward and direct. But not clumsy, not at all. He knew what to do, and he set about doing it; and where there were things he had to learn, as any man must when it is his first time with a new woman, he knew what they were and he knew how to learn them. I understood now what was meant when women said that Greek men make love like poets and Romans like engineers. What I had never realized until that moment was that engineers have skills that many poets never have, and that an engineer could be capable of writing fine poetry, but would you not think twice about riding across a bridge that had been designed or built by a poet?

We lay together until dawn, laughing and talking when we were not embracing. And then, having had no sleep, we rose in our nakedness and walked through the halls to the bath-chamber, and in great merriment washed ourselves, and, still naked, walked out into the sweet pink dawn. Side by side we stood, saying nothing, watching the sun come up out of Byzantium and begin its day's journey onward toward Roma, toward the lands along the Western Sea, toward Nova Roma, toward far-off Khitai.

We dressed and had a breakfast of wine and cheese and figs, and I called for horses and took him on a tour of the estate. I showed him the olive groves, the fields of wheat, the mill and its stream, the fig-trees laden with fruit. The day was warm and beautiful; the birds sang, the sky was clear.

Later, as we took our midday meal on the patio overlooking the garden, he said, "This is a marvelous place. I hope that when I'm old I can retire to a country estate like this."

"Surely there must be one in your family," I said.

"Several. But not, I think, as peaceful as this. We Romans have forgotten how to live peacefully."

"Whereas we, since we are a declining race, can allow ourselves the luxury of a little tranquility?"

He looked at me strangely. "You see yourselves as a declining race?"

"Don't be disingenuous, Quintus Pompeius. There's no need to flatter me now. Of course we are."

"Because you're no longer an imperial power?"

"Of course. Once ambassadors from places like Nova Roma and Baghdad and Memphis and Khitai came to us. Not here to Venetia, I mean, but to Constantinopolis. Now the ambassadors go only to Roma; what the Greek cities get is tourists. And Roman proconsuls."

"How strange your view of the world is, Eudoxia."

"What do you mean?"

"You equate the loss of the Imperium with being in decline."

"Wouldn't you?"

"If it happened to Roma, yes. But Byzantium isn't Roma." He was staring at me very seriously now. "The Eastern Empire was a folly, a distraction, a great mistake that somehow endured a thousand years. It should never have been. The burden of ruling the world was given to Roma: we accept it as our duty. There was never any need for an Eastern Empire in the first place."

"It was all some terrible error of Constantine's, you say?"

"Exactly. It was a bad time for Roma, then. Even empires have their fluctuations; even ours. We had overextended ourselves, and everything was shaking. Constantine had political problems at home, and too many troublesome sons. He thought the Empire was unwieldy and impossible to hold together, so he built the eastern capital and let the two halves drift apart. The system worked for a while—no, I admit it, for hundreds of years—but as the East lost sight of the fact that its political system had been set up by Romans and began to remember that it was really Greek, its doom became inevitable. A Greek Imperium is an anomaly that can't sustain itself in the modern world. It couldn't even sustain itself very long in the ancient world. The phrase is a contradiction in terms, a Greek Imperium. Agamemnon had no Imperium: he was only a tribal chief, who could barely make his power felt ten miles from Mycenae. And how long did the Athenian Empire last? How long did Alexander's kingdom hold together, once Alexander had died? No, no, no, Eudoxia, the Greeks are a marvelous people, the whole world is in their debt for any number of great achievements, but building and sustaining governments on a large scale isn't one of their skills. And never has been."

"You think so?" I said, with glee in my voice. "Then why was it that we were able to defeat you in the Civil War? It was Caesar Maximilianus who surrendered to the Basileus Andronicus, is that not so, West yielding to East, and not the other way around. For two hundred years we of the East were supreme in the world, may I remind you."

Falco shrugged. "The gods were teaching Roma a lesson, that's all. It was another fluctuation. We were being punished for having allowed the Empire to be divided in the first place. We needed to be humbled for a little while, so we'd never make the same mistake again. So you Greeks beat us very soundly in Maximilianus's time, and you had a couple of hundred years of being, as you say, supreme, while we discovered what it felt like to be a second-rate power. But it was an impossible situation. The gods *intend* Roma to rule the world. There's simply no doubt of that. It was true in the time of Carthage and it's true today. And so the Greek Empire fell apart without even the need for a second Civil War. And so here we are. A Roman procurator sits in the royal palace at Constantinopolis. And a Roman proconsul in Venetia. Although at the moment he happens to be at the country estate of a lovely Venetian lady."

"You're serious?" I said. "You really believe that you are a chosen people? That Roma holds the Imperium by the will of the gods?"

"Absolutely."

He was altogether sincere.

"The Pax Romana is Zeus's gift to humanity? Jupiter's gift, I should say."

"Yes," he said. "But for us, the world would fall into chaos. Gods, woman, do you think we *want* to spend our lives being administrators and bureaucrats? Don't you think I'd prefer to retire to some estate like this and spend my days hunting and fishing and farming? But we are the race that understands how to rule. And therefore we have the obligation to rule. Oh, Eudoxia, Eudoxia, you think we're simple brutal beasts who go around conquering everybody for the sheer joy of conquest, and you don't realize that this is our task, our burden, our *job*."

"I will weep for you, then."

He smiled. "Am I a simple brutal beast?"

"Of course you are. All Romans are."

* * *

He stayed with me for five days. I think we slept perhaps ten hours in all that time. Then he begged leave of me, saying that it was necessary that he return to his tasks in Venetia, and he went away.

I remained behind, with plenty to think about.

I could not, of course, accept his thesis that Greeks were incapable of governing anyone and that Roma had some divine mandate to run the world. The Eastern Empire had spread over great segments of the known world in its first few hundred years—Syria, Arabia, Aiguptos, much of eastern Europa even as far as Venetia, which is virtually in Roma's back yard—and we had thrived and prospered mightily, as the wealth of the great Byzantine cities still attests. And in later years, when the Romans had begun to find that their Greek cousins were growing uncomfortably powerful and had attempted to reassert the supremacy of the West, we had fought a fifty-year Civil War and had beaten them quite handily. Which had led to two centuries of Byzantine hegemony, hard times for the West while Byzantine merchant-ships traveled to the rich cities of Asia and Africa. I suppose ultimately we had overreached ourselves, as all empires eventually do, or perhaps we simply went soft with too much prosperity, and so the Romans awakened out of their sleep of centuries and shook our empire apart. Maybe they are the great exception: maybe their Imperium really will go on and on and on through the ages to come, as it has done for the last fifteen hundred years, with only minor periods of what Falco would call "fluctuations" to disrupt its unbroken span of command. And therefore our territories have been reduced by the inexorable force of the imperial destiny of Roma to the status of Roman provinces again, as they were in the time of Augustus Caesar. But we had had our time of grandeur. We had ruled the world just as well as the Romans ever did.

Or so I told myself. But even as I thought it, I knew it wasn't so.

We Greeks could understand grandeur, yes. We understand splendor and imperial pomp. But the Romans know how to do the day-by-day work of governing. Maybe Falco was right after all: maybe our pitiful few centuries of Imperium, interrupting the long Roman sway, had been just an anomaly of history. For now the Eastern Empire was only a memory and the Pax Romana was once again in force across thousands of miles, and from his hilltop in Roma the great Caesar Flavius Romulus presided over a realm such as the world had never before known, Romans in remotest Asia, Romans in India, Roman vessels traveling even to the astonishing new continents of the far western hemisphere, strange new inventions coming forth—printed books, weapons that hurl heavy missiles great distances, all sorts of miracles—and we Greeks are reduced to contemplation of past glories as we sit in our conquered cities sipping our wine and reading Homer and Sophocles. For the first time in my life I saw my people as a minor race, elegant, charming, cultivated, unimportant.

How I had despised my handsome proconsul! And how he had revenged himself on me for that!

I stayed in Istria two more days and then I returned to the city. There was a gift waiting for me from Falco: a sleek piece of carved ivory that showed a house of strange design and a woman with delicate features sitting pensively beside a lake under a tree with weeping boughs. The note from him that accompanied it said that it was from Khitai, that he had obtained it in the land of Bactria, on India's borders. He had not told me that he had been to Bactria too. The thought of his travels on behalf of Roma dizzied me: so many voyages, such strenuous journeys. And I imagined him gathering little treasures such as these wherever he went, and carrying them about with him to bestow on his ladies in other lands. That thought so angered me that I nearly hurled the ivory piece away. But I reconsidered, and put it in my cabinet of curios next to the stone goddess from Aiguptos.

It was his turn now to invite me to dine with him at the palace of the Doges, and—I assumed—to spend the night in the bed where the Doges and their consorts once had slept. But I waited a week and then a second week, and the invitation did not come. That seemed out of keeping with my new awareness of him as a man of great attainment. But perhaps I had overestimated him. He was, after all, a Roman. He had had what he wanted from me; now he was on to other adventures, other conquests.

I was wrong about that, too.

When my impatience had darkened once again into anger toward him and my fury over having let him use me this way had obliterated all the regard for him that had developed in me during his visit to my estate, I went to my uncle Demetrios and said, "Have you seen this Roman proconsul of ours lately? Has he been ill, do you think?"

"Why, is he of any concern to you, Eudoxia?"

I glowered at him. Having pushed me into Falco's arms to serve his own purposes, Demetrios had no right to mock me now. Sharply I said, "He owes me the courtesy of an invitation to the palace, uncle. Not that I would accept it—not now. But he should know that he has given offense."

"And I am supposed to tell him that?"

"Tell him nothing. *Nothing!*"

Demetrios gave me a knowing smirk. But I was sure he would keep silent. There was nothing for him to gain in humiliating me in the eyes of Pompeius Falco.

The days went by. And then at last came a note from Falco, in elegant Greek script as all his notes were, asking if he might call on me. My impulse was to refuse. But one did not refuse such requests from a proconsul. And in any case I realized that I wanted to see him again. I wanted very much to see him again.

"I hope you will forgive me, lady, for my inattentiveness," he said. "But I have had a great deal on my mind in these recent weeks."

"I'm certain that you have," I said drily.

Color came to his face. "You have every right to be angry with me, Eudoxia. But this has been a time of unusual circumstances. There have been great upheavals in Roma, do you know? The Emperor has reshuffled his Cabinet. Important men have fallen; others have risen suddenly to glory."

"And how has this concerned you?" I asked him. "Are you one of those who has fallen, or have you risen to glory? Or should I not ask you any of this?"

"One of those who has risen," he said, "is Gaius Julius Flavillus."

The name meant nothing to me.

"Gaius Julius Flavillus, lady, had held the post of Third Flamen. Now he is First Tribune. Which is a considerable elevation, as you may know. It happens that Gaius Flavillus is a man of Tarraco, like the Emperor, like myself. He is my father's cousin. He has been my patron throughout my career. And so—messengers have been going back and forth between Venetia and Roma for all these weeks—I too have been elevated, it seems, by special favor of the new Tribune."

"Elevated," I said hollowly.

"Indeed. I have been transferred to Constantinopolis, where I am to be the new procurator. It is the highest administrative post in the former Eastern Empire." His eyes were glittering with self-satisfaction. But then his expression changed. A kind of sadness came into them, a kind of tenderness. "Lady, you must believe me when I tell you that I greeted the news with a mixture of feelings, not all of them pleasant ones. It is a great honor for me. And yet I would not have left Venetia so quickly of my own choosing. We have barely begun to know each other; and now, to my immense regret, we must part."

He took my hands in his. He seemed almost to be at the edge of tears. His sincerity seemed real; or else he was a better actor than I suspected.

A kind of numbness spread through me.

"When do you leave?" I asked.

"In three days, lady."

"Ah. Three days."

"Three very busy days."

You could always take me with you to Constantinopolis, I found myself thinking. There would surely be room for me somewhere in the vast palace of the former Basileus where you now will make your home.

But of course that could never be. A Roman rising as swiftly as he was would never want to encumber himself with a Byzantine wife. A Byzantine mistress, perhaps. But mistresses of any sort were no longer what he needed. Now was the time for him to make an auspicious marriage and undertake the next stage of his climb. The procurator's seat at Constantinopolis would detain him little longer than his proconsulship in Venetia had; his path would lead him before very long back to Roma. He would be a flamen, a tribune, perhaps Pontifex Maximus. If he played his cards right he might some day be Emperor. I might be summoned then to Roma to relive old times, perhaps. But I would not see him again before then.

"May I stay this night with you?" he asked, with a strange new note of uncertainty in his voice, as though expecting that I might refuse.

But of course I did not refuse. That would have been crass and petty; and in any case I wanted him. I knew that this was the last chance.

It was a night of wine and poetry, of tears and laughter, of ecstasy and exhaustion.

And then he was gone, leaving me mired in my petty little provincial life while he went on to Constantinopolis and glory. A grand procession of gondolas followed him down the canal as he made his way to the sea. A new Roman proconsul, so they say, will be arriving in Venetia any day now.

From Falco I had one parting gift: the plays of Aeschylus, in a finely bound volume that had been produced on the printing press, which is one of those new inventions of which they are so proud in Roma. My first reaction was one of scorn, that he should give me this machine-made thing instead of a manuscript indited by hand. And then, as I had done so many times in the days of my involvement with this difficult man, I was forced to reconsider, to admire what at first sight I had seen as cheap and vulgar. The book was beautiful, in its way. More than that: it was a sign of a new age. To deny that new age, or turn my back on it, would be folly.

And so I have learned at first hand of the power of Roma and of the insignificance of the formerly great. Our lovely Venetia was only a way-station for him. Constantinopolis of imperial grandeur will be the same. It was a powerful lesson: I have been thoroughly educated in the ways of Roma and the Romans, to my own great cost, for I see now as I never could have seen before that they are everything and we, polished and refined as we may be, are nothing at all.

I had underestimated Quintus Pompeius Falco at every turn; I had underestimated his race the same way. As had we all, which is why they once again rule the world, or most of it, and we smile and bow and hope for their favor.

He has written to me several times. So I must have made a strong impression on him. He speaks fondly, if guardedly, of our times together. He says nothing, though, about hoping that I will pay a visit to Constantinopolis to see him.

But perhaps I will, one of these days, nevertheless. Or perhaps not. It all depends on what the new proconsul is like.●

AFTERWORD: OUTPOST OF THE EMPIRE

One of the pleasures for the reader of the alternate-universe story is detecting the point in history at which the universe of the story diverged from our world. It's a little unsporting for the author to spell out the timeline differential in a foreword or afterword. But it's also a little unsporting for the author to withhold the essential information entirely from the reader, and that's what I've done here, since "An Outpost of the Empire" is one of a group of stories set in the same background that I've written over the last few years and it isn't feasible to interpolate the necessary background information in every story. So:

What happened—as detailed in the initial story of the group, "To the Promised Land"—is that the Hebrew exodus from Egypt under Moses miscarried, the Jews remained in bondage to Pharaoh and never reached Palestine, and as a result Christianity did not develop. Rome stayed pagan and was therefore able to renew itself during the period we call the Dark Ages, fend off the invasions of the barbarians, and sustain itself as a thriving worldwide empire on into modern times. The history of Rome in this alternate world remained essentially the same as it was in ours, minus only the presence of the Christian minority, throughout the early centuries of the Empire—from the time of Augustus to that of Constantine, say. And the division of the Empire into East and West under Constantine followed the lines of what took place in our own timeline. But, as "An Outpost of the Empire" demonstrates, things became somewhat different after that. . . .

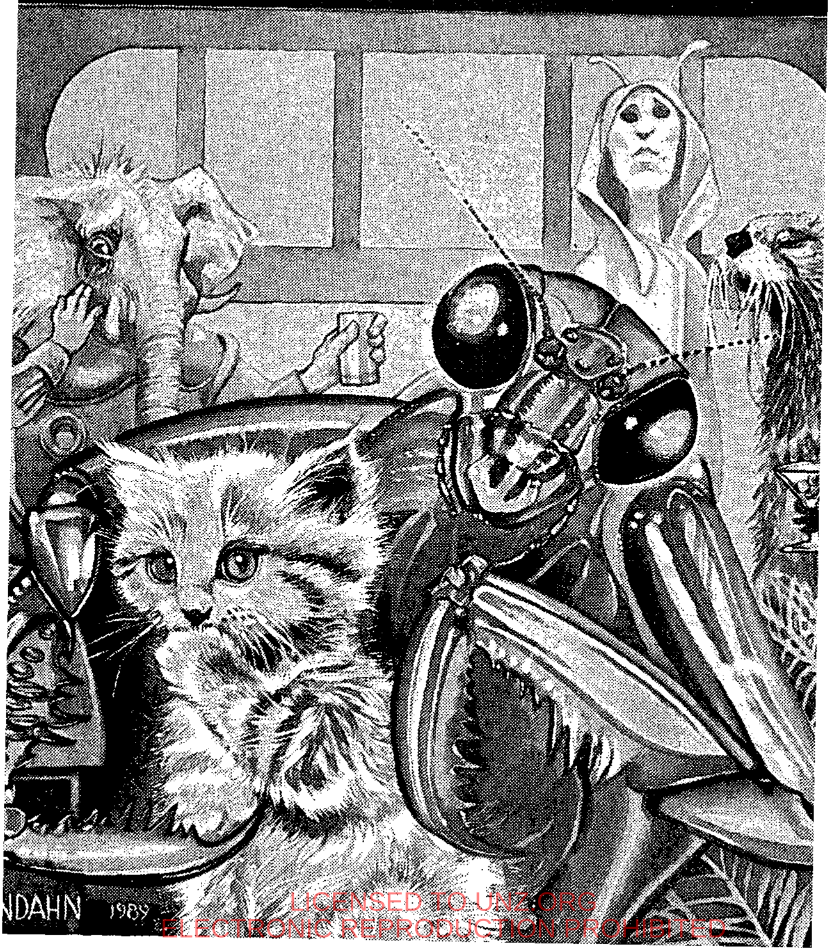
Robert Silverberg

THE ADOPTION

by Alexander Jablokov

art: Ron and Val Lakey Lindahn

"The Adoption" shares the same future Boston milieu as Alexander Jablokov's earlier tale, "The Place of No Shadows" (November 1990), and both Steve Popkes's novella "The Egg" (January 1989) and D. Alexander Smith's short story, "Dying in Hull" (November 1988). The authors plan to collect these stories into a future Boston mosaic novel.



"Don't you think this was a bit risky, Sussman?" asked Salton Abt, a pudgy man in a padded blue jacket finely patterned with silver. "Yevgeni's gone too far this time, I'd say."

Garner Sussman, a barrel-chested man with the large nose and facial features of an Indian chief in an old movie, pulled at his lower lip and stared back. Salton Abt was one of Yevgeni Mudande's main business competitors. It had been socially necessary to invite him to the adoption ceremony, but the bastard should have had the grace to claim he was busy. Damn it, it wasn't Sussman's job to talk to the idiot. "What do you mean?"

Abt glanced over his shoulder, sensing the passage of a canape cart, and snagged several stuffed mushrooms. "Well, I mean, really." He gestured Sussman to come closer, as if wanting to impart a monstrous secret. "Adopting a *seaman* as an ancestor. I think your employer's losing his touch." He swallowed the mushrooms.

Privately, Sussman agreed with him. Ever-deepening water sucked at the foundations of the city, and decent people wanted to do all they could to forget it. Putting a sailor in an ancestor chamber was like proudly displaying a child-molesting uncle. "Not just a seaman. Captain Obadiah Steelyard was a whaler. One of the mainstays of our city's wealth, in the old days."

Abt snorted, rejecting the distinction. "A water rat. A sloshfoot."

This was close to serious insult. Sussman frowned and gestured with his huge hands. "I think you're forgetting what being a Bostonian means, Mr. Abt." He hated playing diplomat.

With a fine sense of his Alien Master's reluctance to defend a position he himself felt to be untenable, Yevgeni Mudande appeared at Abt's shoulder. He was a heavy and powerful man with black skin and bushy pepper-and-salt hair. "Salton!" He pressed a large plate of steaming sausages into his rival's hands. "Fresh from the kitchen. Cumin and pepper, your favorite. I saved them for you."

Despite himself, Abt's many-chinned face lit up. He licked his lips. Mudande smiled at him, all genial host. "Come on, I want to show you some things. My venerable ancestor was quite an expert at scrimshaw, did you know that?"

"Scrimshaw?" Abt mumbled around a sausage.

"Engraving on the teeth of whales. I have some of his best work, I'm sure you'll be interested." Abt, torn between hunger and dismay, allowed himself to be led off.

Sussman looked around the party to make sure that there was no one else he needed to avoid. The house was full of a noisy crowd, for a Mudande invitation was something to be sought after, even for the adoption of a *sailor*. Five species of extraterrestrial were in attendance, so Sussman, whose specialty was managing inter-species encounters, was on full alert.

A Tulgut stood by one wall like a multi-armed elephant. They were a calm race, easy to deal with, except that they tended to inadvertently step on and crush the furniture that was everywhere in the fussily over-decorated interiors of contemporary Boston.

The Bishop 24, frighteningly, had put in an appearance. Mudande always invited him, and this time he had accepted. Mudande was pleased. High status came with having the only representative of the centaurs on Earth at an adoption party. Still, the protocol problems of handling a six-foot-high armored praying mantis with inhumanly fast reflexes who liked challenging other beings to sentience duels, loser to be eaten, were something Sussman would have preferred not to deal with. He had made sure that the Bishop had an immense amount of high-protein food to support his high metabolism.

He could see the centaur, whose body moved like a whip cracking, almost too fast to see, behind a potted palm, discussing something with an elegantly dressed Bostonian. Centaurs could be quite personable when they cared to. They could also eat you, without ceasing to be personable. The Bishop 24 had told Sussman that Earth humans were considered "inedible for reason of insanity." This meant that his threats to eat people were jokes. Sussman didn't like comedians.

Three Phneri, who resembled golden-haired sea otters, matted and bedraggled as if they had been poorly packed for shipping, examined an elaborate gadget that lay shattered on the marble floor at the base of a pedestal. They fluted and whistled to each other. Sussman breathed a sigh of relief. At least *that* had been taken care of.

"Garner," Tara Mudande's cold voice said. "How could you have let that happen? I told you to be careful with it. Now look at them. The present they brought us is broken. How can I face them?"

Sussman tried for a diplomatic expression and achieved something that looked like indigestion. "How many times do I have to explain—ah, never mind. Besides, Mastic did it. You saw it yourself. He grabbed it and knocked it over onto the floor."

"I know it's your fault, Garner. It has to be." She glared at him with her green eyes and ran a finger through the elaborate coif of her red hair. "I don't care what you say about their racial ethic requiring the destruction of art works. It's still not polite. I didn't even have time to clean it up."

Mastic, a large orange tom, sat on an overstuffed armchair, placidly chewing on the catnip mouse that Sussman had managed to shove inside the Phneri gift just before the party started. If they had arrived and found their gift preserved, like something dead, God only knows what would have happened. Mudande & Associates had important contracts with the Phneri that could have been imperiled by an act of such unthinking rudeness. But try to explain that to Tara Mudande. She knew what was polite and what wasn't.

Besides, she was still enraged that her husband had chosen a sailor as an ancestor. Mudande might not care, but it involved a lowering of status for her. She was not even mollified when the Phneri gathered around her, congratulating her on the clever way she had destroyed their gift.

As she tried to make small talk with them, Sussman escaped. Mastic lay on the sofa, eyes half shut, completely stoned. Sussman snagged the catnip mouse as the last piece of evidence and wandered toward the ancestor chambers. He peeked into the newest chamber. Mudande was still busily lecturing the unfortunate Abt on the finer points of scrimshaw. Abt stood glaze-eyed, his plate of sausages growing cold, as Mundande shoved a particularly large sperm whale tooth in his face. Behind them, grim as death, stood the figure of Captain Obadiah Steelyard as he had appeared in 1790, with long, patriarchal beard and odd cylindrical hat. Made out of multicolored porcelain, he was a clever reconstruction from engravings. He held a massive iron-headed harpoon. The room was full of nautical artifacts and smelled of the sea. No one but Mudande and his victim had entered the room for the entire time of the party.

The next chamber was that of Amy Farnsworth, an 1840's Abolitionist. She was almost as severe as her newest co-ancestor, hair pulled back, though with an inappropriate corkscrew curl dangling in front of each ear in deference to style, high forehead creased with care, eyebrows beetling like storm clouds. Probably the only time in her life she had ever smiled was when John Brown hit Harper's Ferry. The room smelled of tea and Bible leather.

The third ancestor chamber belonged to Chris O'Hanrahan, an Irish pol from the 1930s. He was a fat, genial, corrupt man, sloppily dressed. A map of South Boston as it had been before it sank hung on the wall behind him. This room smelled of tobacco and whisky, and was Sussman's favorite. For someone whose father had been a Nuba tribesman from a hill village in central Sudan, Yevgeni Mudande had managed to acquire a distinguished Boston family.

"Garner!" Tara Mudande swept into the room. "Come here. That damn ecclesiastical insect—"

"The centaur, Bishop 24. Be careful, Mrs. Mudande, he's one of the most influential aliens on Earth."

"I don't care! Mastic stole some of his food, and he wants to challenge the cat to a duel." Mastic was renowned in the household for his skill at hooking food.

"He wants that damn tomcat for dessert," Sussman said cruelly. "I'm not so sure I shouldn't let him eat it." He thought for a moment. In fighting sentience duels, centaurs were willing to accept their opponents' definitions of sentience: the equivalent of giving the challenged party choice of weapons. If he could convince the Bishop 24 that the cat definition of sentience was the ability to catch mice . . . Mastic was damn good at catching mice. Sussman had watched him at it in one of Mudande's waterfront warehouses. What would the centaur do if he lost a sentience duel to a domestic specimen of *Felis catus?* The thought was too charming. The Bishop 24 would be completely uninterested, the whole affair would turn out a total disaster, and Mudande would become enraged. Mudande had plans for the Bishop 24.

"Stay out of the way," Sussman said. "*Well* out of the way."

Tara Mudande started to bridle, then nodded. "I'll wait here."

Sussman headed for the living room. Let no one say that he didn't earn his salary. . . .

Of the complex space that was the Mudande house, Garner Sussman's quarters were the only place he felt was his own: a small bedroom, an even smaller study, and a bathroom, now lit with the dim blue he preferred before bed. A humble monastic cell for the great scholar he had once wanted to be. He liked the feel of the smooth wood floor on his bare feet.

Sussman walked into the bedroom, undoing the sash of his velvet robe, and froze. Yevgeni Mudande stood at the bureau like some immense idol reminding a dilatory devotee that sacrifice had not yet been made.

Sussman yanked at his robe, outraged that his private domain had been invaded. "What are you doing here?"

Mudande glared at him, no longer the jovial host. "Sorry. Something's come up. *Business*. Let's go."

"But I want to sleep," Sussman said, looking with longing at the bed, its coverlet temptingly turned down to show the flannel sheets. "Can't it wait?"

"No."

"You're always doing this. You have no sense of moderation."

Mudande quirked his full lips. "Maybe that's why *you* work for *me*."

"Maybe that's why I can relax and you always have a bee up your ass." He paused. "It's important? Aliens involved?"

"Didn't I say that? First substantive contact with a new species. Just thought you'd be interested."

Sussman took a deep breath. "Let's go."

Mudande's office was three levels above the main part of the house. "House," in Boston in the 2080s, was a slippery term. Since the Inner Ring, that part of the city preserved from sinking into Boston Harbor, was virtually packed solid with living structure, individual buildings no longer existed. The Mudande house was a specified geometric airspace, closed in on three sides. The fourth side opened out on one of the deep light-canyons. It had copper cupolas and a fanlight over the door.

Mudande's office was an ancient subway car, its seats ripped out, welded into the structure of the residential tower. In contrast to the fuss of the rest of the house, it was almost undecorated. Light came from the original fixtures. The windows were quiescent now, pearly gray, though they could display data or holographic images on command. Sussman rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands and sat down on one of the hard stools.

"I think I may have an interesting opening," Mudande said. "A species from out along the Perseus axis, called the Llonr. Know them?"

"As much as anyone does. Associated with the Targives, which means they probably have an improbable physiology and an incomprehensible psychology, though no one knows. They dropped through the Rabbit Hole about half a year ago and have been hiding out somewhere in Boston Harbor ever since. What do you have on them?"

"Not a lot." Mudande drummed his thick fingers on the desk. "An opening. I overheard a conversation two days ago during dinner at the Benedictine. That fool Abt and one of his pet sources at IPOB. Abt is just the kind of person who talks about things like that at the club. Crude. Abt thinks he can make money from the Llonr, because they have a problem, and someone in the Interstellar Port of Boston thinks they can profit from it as well. That fit with a few other things I had heard. Something's gone wrong. The Llonr need of help. I put two and two together and got something between three and five."

The Benedictine was Mudande's club. NANA, as they said. No Aliens Need Apply. And very few humans had the qualifications either. Sussman had been in the Guest Lounge several times for a glass of Calvados, but that was as far as he was allowed to go. Beyond the heavy bronze doors that sealed the Guest Lounge off from the rest of the club, the real business of Boston went on. There the men and women who ran the most powerful economic machine in Earth's history exchanged gossip that caused gains and losses in amounts that required scientific notation for their expression.

"All right," Sussman said. "So, bright and early tomorrow morning I'll—"

"No. I need the information by tomorrow, sunset. That's when our appointment is. You should start now."

"What?" Sussman yelped. "That's outrageous."

"That's business." Mudande stood up. "Think you can do it?"

Sussman looked sulky. "Looks like I'll have to."

"That's the spirit I like to see! I'll meet you at the entrance of Miller's Hall, tomorrow sunset."

"You'll want translation?" Sussman said, slowly.

"Of course. We have an account with the Targives, don't we? It's part of the trading agreement. You can get Llonr language lessons from them easily enough."

"And turn my brain inside out."

"You think I don't pay you enough? Get to work. And change out of that ridiculous robe. You're not a student anymore."

The first thing Garner Sussman noticed when he stepped through the Pearl Street water gate was the smell of the sea. It smelled of salt and seaweed and floating garbage. It smelled of forgetfulness, for the mighty city that rose up out of the water had turned its back on it. Waves lapped somewhere below him. His eyes adjusted to that exterior night which never truly came inside the city, and he saw the moving lights of the barges, ferries, and launches that filled the moonlit harbor, physically supporting the city which ignored them. Boston grabbed for the stars, but its feet still stood in the water.

Sussman couldn't see the water itself, but he could sense it, wet and slimy, waiting for him. "Anyone there?" he called.

"Plenty of us," came the reply. "Who do you want?"

Sussman walked forward nervously on the floating dock, which rose and sank rhythmically in the waves. The walls of the Old City Ring kept the moonlight at bay, and he had neglected to bring a light of his own. Vessels crowded the dock, everything from hovercraft to augmented-surface-tension waterwalkers. The summer night was surprisingly warm. Sussman couldn't remember the last time he had thought about what season of the year it was.

"Marco Tander," Sussman said. "Is he here?"

"I am," a voice answered reluctantly, as other voices laughed, or muttered remarks to each other. When city dwellers sought the water, it was for no good purpose.

"I need a water taxi." Sussman stepped forward. "It's important."

"Important, he says. What's so important about it?" Tander sat slumped against the mooring post of his boat, only the glow of the end of his cigarette visible.

"I'm buying transportation," Sussman said. "Are you selling? Or are you just hanging out here enjoying the breeze?"

The cigarette flared one last time, then arched off into the water. Tander coughed and stood up. "Why do you want me? My boat's a hull-down. Slow."

"Is everyone here as eager for business as you?"

"I don't know, why don't you ask them?"

"Francine Cherna recommended you," Sussman said. "She said you had guts. Frankie's smart, but she's been wrong before."

Tander paused. "All right, all right. Standard rates. Around the city and up the Charles? There are easier ways of getting to Harvard, God knows."

"We're not going to Harvard. We're going to South Boston."

"The hell we are, startit sucker."

Francine Cherna kept to the old life, the one Sussman had given up. She got dressed in the bedroom while her husband Ettore stood at the door, arms folded, as if on guard duty, and stared coldly at the richly dressed stranger who had forced his way into their living room, a stranger who had turned out to be an old schoolmate, well forgotten.

"I'm sorry about this, Ettore," Sussman said. "It's important."

"Of course it's important." Ettore was a big man with a thick neck. His bathrobe was tattered. "To someone else. Why else would you be here?"

"Stop it, Ettore," Frankie said from inside. She opened the door, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. "Go back to bed. Garner and I will talk. No, you'll just make trouble. Bed for you." With a final glower at his wife's former lover, Ettore vanished into the bedroom, pulling the door shut behind him. The door was warped, and sprang back open. He pulled it closed slowly, in a silence more searing than any curses.

Cherna, big brown eyes and tousled hair, exactly as she had been as a student, tilted her head quizzically. "So, Garner, your businessman had insomnia, and you're awake."

"Something like that." He took a breath. "It's been a long time."

She stared at him solemnly for a long moment, so that he could remember how he had drawn away from her, from all of them, over the years. Then she smiled, her head tilted slightly the way she always did, as if she had just remembered something amusing that had nothing to do with the situation at hand. She timed it well enough that he understood that the smile was a gift, not something he deserved. "Yes it has," she said. "What do you want, Garner?"

"What makes you think I want something?" He winced inwardly at the falseness in his tone.

"Come on." She quirked the side of her mouth. "Who makes social calls at three in the morning? You need my help. What is it?"

Frankie and Ettore's room was about the size of Sussman's own quarters in the Mudande house, but shabbier. In Boston even austerity cost money. The floor was painted gray and the walls were cracking and mildewed. A large blackboard hung on one wall, covered with molecular and anatomical diagrams. Two empty wine bottles lay against a pile of papers in a corner. Every available surface was covered with books, dataforms, and alien artifacts.

Cherna yawned widely. "Sorry. Lar, Ettore, Carol, and I were up late." She pointed at the blackboard. "Carol thinks she's got spatien physiology figured out. She believes they were invented by the Targives. Hell, she thinks we were all invented by the Targives."

Sussman remembered what it was like to spend the night drinking wine and arguing with friends about things of importance instead of managing soirees for Yevgeni Mudande. "She might be right," he said. He moved some books off a chair and sat down. "What do you know about the Llonr?"

Cherna pirouetted slowly in the middle of the room, her eyes turned upward in thought. Sussman looked at her in wonder. Her hair its eternal mess, her eyes still sticky with sleep, was she really just as beautiful as she had been all those years ago? Age had seized her. There were crow's feet around her eyes and her chin was less chiseled than it had been. But age had held her gently. The lines in her face were like the creases in fine fabric which grew more lustrous the more it was handled. And when she turned her dark eyes on him, looking at the hairy-eared, overweight tool of wealth he had become, he knew that he had never been as young as she was now.

She grinned at him. "Your boss is after some strange ones, isn't he? Let's see what I can show you." She dove into the clutter of books at one end of the room and unerringly pulled out a single dataform. The accuracy of her random-access filing system had always frustrated Sussman. But then, his old lover was a genius, which he never would be. "The Llonr are probably the most conservative race in the Galaxy, and with good reason. However they evolved, or whoever made them, they have a genetic memory component. They retain their ancestors' memories, back a thousand generations. There are probably Llonr who can still chip flint, or who remember being there when the first grain was sown. Even the smallest Llonr baby seems a hundred years old. It recalls having seen the sun rising over Eden, or the Llonr equivalent."

She fitted the dataform into a reader. A diagram of a Llonr gene locus exploded in the air between them and spun around, fragmenting and reforming. Sussman walked forward into it and ran his hands up the curving stairway of a gene, feeling its smooth logic. He tasted the tang of sulfur-containing amino acids and the chalky sweetness of base sugars, and smelled the acrid manufacture of memory RNA. Endless rows of loci glittered around him like stained glass, back into time, their common genes rumbling in chorus like the leitmotifs of a Wagner opera.

He roamed through them, opening the genes up like a bear ripping through oozing honeycombs, examining the codings for organelle metabolism, the subtle pathways of nerves, the personality traits of shyness and love. Reduced iron atoms held the structure like linchpins, he noticed, catalyzing reactions. They vibrated lazily, buzzing at him like bees.

"The iron," he said. "It's very odd. . . ."

Frankie looked impressed in spite of herself. "That's true. The Llonr home world circles an ancient Population II star and is short of heavy elements. Iron is the heaviest available, and even that is not abundant."

He looked through the genes at her. "Looks like the presence of iron is necessary for reproduction. Coming to Earth must be like an aphrodisiac to the Llonr."

She laughed, a trifle harshly. "The iron has to be entirely non-radioactive. Their genes have little defense against ionizing radiation. That means that it has to have been smelted before 1945, preferably before the 1800s, when coal burning started to release a lot of radioactive radon into the atmosphere. Not enough of that kind of iron around to stimulate them."

Sussman never failed to be impressed by her command of the minutiae as well as the essentials. Did he really now spend his time talking to the likes of Salton Abt and Tara Mudande? Why? "How do they keep from scrambling the memories through recombination?" he asked, though he suspected he knew. He wanted to hear her voice say it.

"The Llonr rigidly retain gene lines, breeding in for pure memories. Each clan has its own shared memory store, as well as its shared tastes, neuroses, and obsessions. Some clans build the same building over and over, ever larger. Some have elaborate systems of music or philosophy that are incomprehensible to anyone else. The longer each clan remains distinct, the stranger it gets."

Sussman wandered out of the gene loci and stood in front of a pattern of curving lines, a simple drawing, the obsession of one Llonr clan. A sun rose in the cleft between two hills and a tree's long branches hung down over it. The pattern of two hills, a sun, a tree remained unchanged for millennia. He saw it daubed in ocher on the wall of a cave, impressed with a stylus in a slab of wet river mud, carved deep into a massive granite slab, painted in fresco on the plaster wall of a villa, slapped in a thick impasto of oil paint on a stretched canvas, dyed on a garment with vivid aniline dyes, and finally flickering on a liquid crystal computer screen in two hundred fifty-six colors.

"Can I borrow that dataform?" Sussman asked.

She looked at him. "Why does your boss think he can profit from the Llonr?"

"Don't say 'profit' as if it were a dirty word," Sussman said, keeping his voice cool. It was their old, old argument.

"Why did you come back here, Garner?"

"I—because you're the best, Frankie. You always have been."

She nodded and with a quick movement tossed him the dataform. He caught it clumsily, almost dropping it. "You always were a practical man, Garner. You knew that I couldn't help but be interested in the Llonr, because no one else knows anything about them. We never change, do we? Where are you going now?"

Sussman sighed heavily. "Where else? Telegraph Island, to the Targives. I need translator training. We're meeting with the Llonr tomorrow evening."

For the first time he sensed she was jealous, which gave him some small measure of satisfaction. The Targives could provide knowledge, but the price was so high that only the great magnates could afford it. She stared at him. "And your boss expects you to rip your mind open so that he can talk deals with the Llonr."

He shrugged. "It's part of the job."

"So practical. Except about the things that matter." She turned away from him. Her body was still slender under the loose sweatshirt. Sussman almost reached out to her then. But he didn't. Yevgeni Mudande and Ettore made the distance too far for that. No, that wasn't fair. Garner Sussman had made that distance too far, without help from anyone. "How are you going to get there?" she asked suddenly.

"Ah, boat. How else?"

She shook her head and smiled. "You never pay attention to anything, do you, Garner? The water carriers are barely traveling. They haven't been for a week."

"A strike?"

"No. A fear. Oh, don't ask me now. I know a man who can take you where you want. I grew up with him. Marco Tander. Ask for him. He'll do it." She looked back at him. "You hate the water, don't you, Garner?"

"You know I do."

He lay on his back in the boat, gasping for breath. Did the mind-rooting really get worse every time? The Targive citadel at Telegraph Island lay behind them as Tander steered their way home. Sussman gazed up at the sky as morning drew itself across the stars and felt the crawling of Targive-generated knowledge at the back of his head, like maggots teeming in a decaying corpse. Who knew what neurons now slithered through the interstices of his central nervous system? In providing knowledge, the Targives sold not only software but hardware, optimal neural processors that mimicked the activities of alien brains. Some small part of Sussman's brain would forever work like a Llonr cortex. What had the Targives scooped out to make room for it?

Marco Tander glumly directed the boat back toward Boston, ignoring the muttered convulsions of his passenger. He looked as if he still regretted having been persuaded to go, despite the obscene price Sussman had finally been compelled to pay him. In the sunlight Tander turned out to be a small man with a large handlebar moustache. Tander's boat, an ancient Boston whaler called the *Queequeg*, was much the worse for wear and, by daylight, did not look very seaworthy, at least to Sussman's landlubber eye.

Sussman sat up and looked at Tander. Tander ignored him, gazing off toward the horizon, where the swollen sun had just risen. Waves lapped at the boat. Water absorbed everything in the end—filth, bodies, and souls—sucked down into the wet darkness. Ahead of them loomed the glittering mass of Boston, less a city than a coral reef looming from the sea, growing ever higher even as it sank into the water. Sussman was anxious to feel dry stability beneath his feet again. Oddly enough, Tander, whose life was spent afloat, looked tense himself. His eyes constantly scanned the water.

"You and Frankie grew up together?" Sussman asked.

Pause. "Yeah. In Jamaica Plain." A poor neighborhood, not considered worth saving, now under the ocean. The engine thrummed. Tander minutely adjusted the tiller and looked out over the water again.

"What's out there, Marco? What are you afraid of?"

"Just shut up and enjoy the ride, black-hole licker."

Sussman snorted, amused in spite of himself. "Come on, Marco. It's a long way. Tell me."

"I don't expect you to believe it. You're a city person. You don't know anything about the water. There's a . . . sea monster in the harbor. Don't laugh. It lives down where the commercial wharves sank. You're lucky I took you. It's not every man that would have."

The meeting hall, long and wide with a low ribbed ceiling, was brightly lit and bare of furniture. The air system soughed gently, scented with spice. A vividly colored rug covered the floor, elaborately patterned with fractal geometries. Sussman and Mudande sank into it up to their ankles. They both wore short padded jackets in a minute diamond pattern, Sussman's black and white, Mundande's black and red, with wide cuffed pants in contrasting lozenges and narrow shoes.

"Where did this place come from?" Mudande asked. "I thought I knew all of Miller's Hall. The damn place keeps getting bigger." He looked down at his feet where the rug swirled in complex intertwined spirals in black, yellow, and red. "Great rug. It would look good in the dining room, don't you think?"

"It's recent. The Targives added it for the convenience of some of their trading partners." Sussman shook his head, but the fuzziness caused by the Targive modifications remained.

Mudande stopped and glanced around, examining the hall more carefully. "All right, Garner. What are we in?"

Sussman grimaced. "A mouth, Yevgeni. A giant mouth. The original, I think, was a lizard that lives on Eta Carina IV. The Targives modified it, the way they like to do. Gives good environmental control and repairs itself." The edges of the rug, near the wall, curled up slightly and moved along in ripples. "The rug, of course—"

"The tongue." Mudande grimaced. "I get the picture. Has it ever swallowed anyone?"

"The digestive system is still the original size. Tiny. It's in one of the corners somewhere. It lives on the trash people drop, moved to it by the tongue. Still want it for the dining room?"

Mudande snorted. "Tara would kill me."

They stopped in the center of the room. Five Llonr came out to meet them. They moved slowly and ponderously, as if the accumulated centuries of memory had physical weight. They were bipeds, but had forelimbs so long that they rested their weight on them when they were not moving. Their bodies were invisible beneath elaborate clothing covered with colored straps and jingling bells. Their heads were sunk into their shoulders and they slumped forward, since their eyes were almost on top of their heads. These were members of one gene line. Sussman knew that other Llonr behaved and dressed quite differently.

One of them made a sound like ball bearings running over a corrugated iron roof, and Sussman sank into the words of the Llonr language. He listened for a while, then talked back, which hurt his throat. His new brain writhed in his head and he wanted to throw up.

Sussman finally turned to Mudande. "They have a question for you. The form of the answer is important. It's not just polite curiosity. They want to know if you are the descendant of Captain Obadiah Steelyard."

Sussman had known Mudande for almost ten years. This was the first time he could remember his looking surprised. The expression vanished quickly. "Tell them yes. I am honored to list Captain Steelyard among my ancestors."

Sussman gargled at the Llonr, and listened to their reply. His head pulsed with each word. "That seems to have been the right answer, Yevgeni. I think this is the reason you managed to get this appointment. The Llonr have no concept of adoption. Now they want you to do them a favor. Say no." His voice was sharp.

"What? Why should I say no? Is that the polite formulation?"

"No, damn it!" To his surprise Sussman found himself shouting. "Saying yes will be a commitment. They have gene memories, remember. If you're descended from Steelyard you must have the memories of a Boston whaling captain."

"Well, maybe I do, Garner." His voice was cold and angry. "You translate and give cultural advice, right? Don't screw with the business side. Salton Abt is hot on this contact too. If having a whaler as a ancestor is my advantage, good. Tell them yes. As my ancestor's descendant, I will do them a favor."

When Sussman turned back to him a moment later his face was white. "In that case, they would like you to recover for them something they have lost, their pet and companion, Miltor."

Mudande had been catching some of Sussman's tension. At this news he smiled in relief. "I remember once when Mastic got out and went wandering out along the canyons. I would have rewarded anyone for that damn cat's return. And I don't even like him. If that's—"

"Miltor is a sea-going creature weighing about fifty tons," Sussman said with dull solidity, slamming each word in like a blow. "He is their pet, and their god, and is something like half a million years old. He's somewhere out in Boston Harbor. They would be very grateful to have him back here by tomorrow." Sussman's mind was flickering. He felt the pain of the Llonr at the loss of their living idol. Miltor! His great bulk loomed over their world. None of them could remember a time when they did not have him.

A look of dismay flashed across Mudande's face and vanished. "Thank goodness the Harbor isn't very deep," he said briskly. "Set up another engagement with them, will you, Garner? Then we can go up to Obadiah's chamber and talk with him about it."

"This is insane," Marco Tander said.

"Shut up," Mudande snapped. "I'm paying you enough, aren't I? A fortune for a slow and noisy boat."

"Making craziness profitable doesn't make it sanity."

Mudande snorted and ignored him, staring off at the horizon. The early morning shore breeze rippled the dark waters of the harbor. Boston loomed above them. Its shadows now fell out over the poorer neighborhoods north and west of the city and the sea was in full light. *Queequeg* growled along through the shallow waters of the old commercial dock areas. The water was too murky for the ruins of what was left of that part of Boston to be seen below. The only ship on the Harbor was a rusty old fishing vessel with nets held up above its deck.

"Tell me what we're after, Garner," Mudande said.

"You've heard it a dozen times," Sussman said sullenly from his post at the center of the boat. The furry head of a Phneri popped out of the water to starboard. Sussman put an electronic talker to his lips and whistled at the Phneri. The Phneri replied with a fluting glissando and vanished again. The Phneri had been contracted to help locate Miltor, more as a favor to them than anything else. They took the whole thing as a lark.

"I want to hear it again."

"You're just trying to calm me down by taking my mind off the idea that we're all going to be killed."

"Tell me the story, dammit! Earn your goddam salary." Mudande cradled the heavy wood and iron of Obadiah Steelyard's harpoon in his arms and rested his head against it.

"Miltor is a colonial organism, like a Portugese man-of-war or a volvox, consisting of hundreds of lesser organisms who reproduce separately. It's been the pet, the focus, the obsession of this group of Llonr for hundreds of thousands of years, almost since they evolved enough to have consciousness. It's the last of its kind."

"As if a group of humans had a pet saber-toothed tiger or woolly mammoth."

Sussman nodded. "It remembers everything too, holographically through all of its constituents. It's been escaping from them from all those years too, repeatedly."

Mudande scratched in his thick graying hair and snorted. "The things people will put up with to have a pet. Ridiculous."

A dozen Phneri heads suddenly popped out of the water at once and shrieked. Their duty finished, they dove under and swam like crazy.

"That's it then," Mudande said, the evenness of his words revealing his tension. He stood up and took off his shirt. His massive torso gleamed in the sun like polished ebony. He held the harpoon up over his head. "Here, Miltor," he crooned. "Here it is. Clean, unradioactive iron. This harpoon was made in 1779. As clean as you'll find on this dirty planet. Three hundred years old. Come here, boy, and get your rocks off."

There was a moment of silence, as if, beneath the water, Miltor were considering this offer. Then, sensing the iron, it came.

Tander yelped once and turned the boat hard to port. Torrents of water roared from the bulk of Miltor as it emerged from the sea. *Queequeg* was cast into darkness as Miltor rose into the sun, featureless as a mass of volcanic rock. Mudande was thrown sideways by the unexpected swerve of the boat and cursed.

For a long moment Sussman was too terrified to do anything. Then the Llonr brain took over. Above them was Miltor, the creature that defined his gene line. Miltor was lost and terrified. Sussman wrestled the tiller away from Tander, elbowing him in the face, and turned the boat back toward Miltor.

"Excellent. Speed the boat, Garner!" They came closer. Mudande pulled his arm back slowly and, as gracefully as the *Queequeg*'s namesake could have, hurled the harpoon at Miltor. It flew smoothly, finally vanishing as a tiny sliver against Miltor's immense bulk. For a long moment everything remained motionless. Sussman had the sensation that Miltor had risen too far out of the water and was now toppling slowly toward them.

Then Miltor shrank and fell in on itself. It disappeared into fragments like a thick swarm of bees suddenly going their separate ways as the elemental iron was absorbed, serving as a powerful signal for reproduction. Miltor came apart into its elemental entities for this purpose. In five minutes nothing was left but the writhing fish-like shapes of Miltor's reproductive structures.

By this time Sussman had managed to remember how to breathe. He dropped the tiller and collapsed, gasping. "We can recover any of these," he said, gesturing at the quick creatures beneath the boat, which made the water dense with silver. "Miltor's memory is holographic. Each is complete." Phneri leaped and chuckled among the fish-like fragments of the great creature, delighted with its dissolution.

"Each has the complete memory, but the focus will be hazy," Mudande said. "I am giving them Miltor, not a fuzzy reproduction of him. Thank God the Bishop 24 has good business contacts."

"What?" Sussman looked up. The fishing vessel they had seen earlier was dipping its nets into the water, grabbing a rich harvest of Miltor.

"No one in Boston invests in fishing anymore," Mudande said. "Too archaic, not interstellar enough. Too wet. The centaur doesn't care. He was the only one I could find with the right equipment readily available. I'm glad you helped me make friends with him."

Sussman settled back in the boat and watched the nets with their shining loads of squirming fish. "Thank Mastic," he said. "The cat's a true diplomat. More than I am, certainly."

Sussman lay with the back of his head against the wooden gunwale. Llonr thoughts flickered through his mind and he thought of the joy they would feel at having Miltor back. They would do anything for Mudande & Associates at that point. He was starting to get used to the new nerves that had been shoved into his skull. Soon he wouldn't remember how he'd lived without them.

"No argument there." Mudande grinned happily into the sunlight. "Is that the basis of interstellar amity, then? Our pets?"

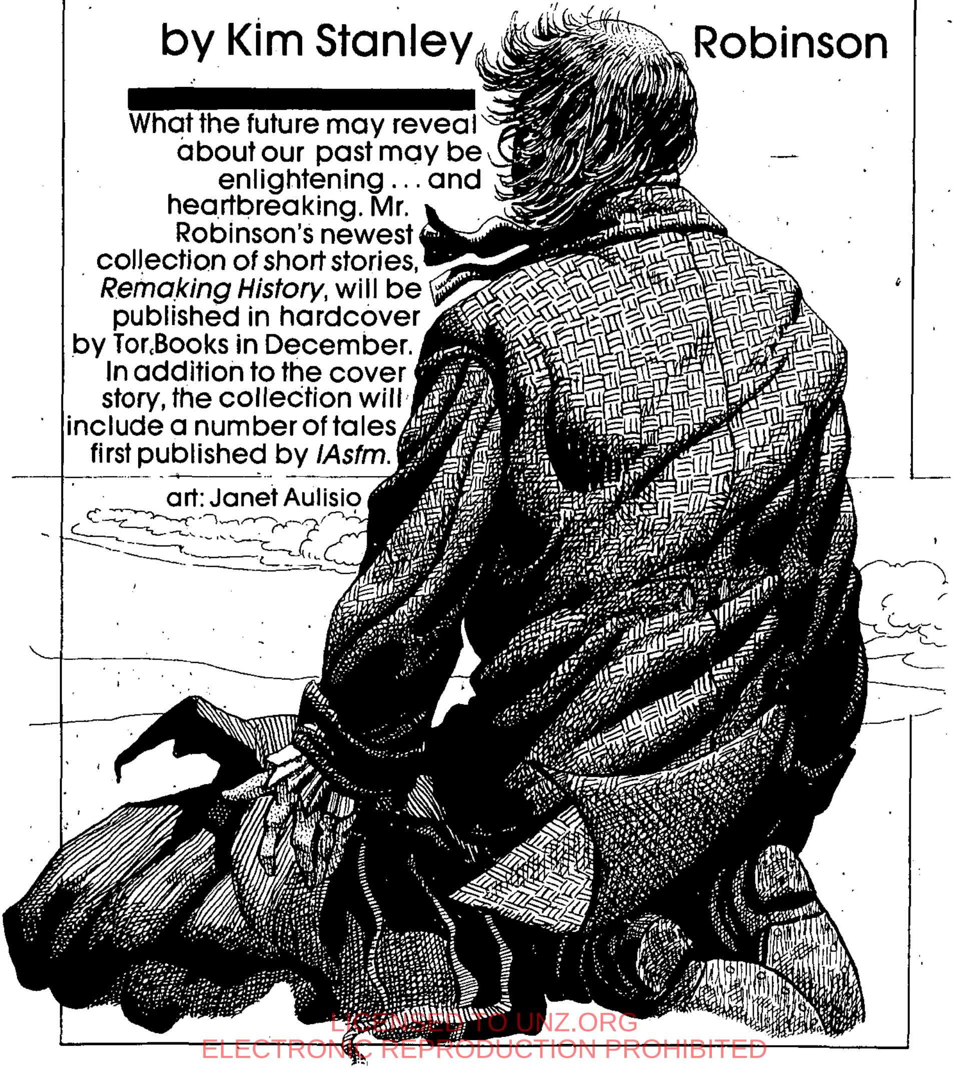
"Our pets," Sussman replied. "And our employees."●

VINLAND THE DREAM

by Kim Stanley Robinson

What the future may reveal about our past may be enlightening . . . and heartbreaking. Mr. Robinson's newest collection of short stories, *Remaking History*, will be published in hardcover by Tor Books in December. In addition to the cover story, the collection will include a number of tales first published by *IAsfm*.

art: Janet Aulisio



Abstract. It was sunset at L'Anse aux Meadows. The water of the bay was still, the boggy beach was dark in the shadows. Flat arms of land pointed to flat islands offshore; beyond these a taller island stood like a loaf of stone in the sea, catching the last of the day's light. A stream gurgled gently as it cut through the beach bog. Above the bog, on a narrow grassy terrace, one could just make out a pattern of low mounds, all that remained of sod walls. Next to them were three or four sod buildings, and beyond the buildings, a number of tents.

A group of people—archeologists, graduate students, volunteer laborers, visitors—moved together onto a rocky ridge overlooking the site. Some of them worked at starting a campfire in a ring of blackened stones; others began to unpack bags of food, and cases of beer. Far across the water lay the dark bulk of Labrador. Kindling caught and their fire burned, a spark of yellow in the dusk's gloom.

Hot dogs and beer, around a campfire by the sea; and yet it was strangely quiet. Voices were subdued. The people on the hill glanced down often at the site, where the head of their dig, a lanky man in his early fifties, was giving a brief tour to their distinguished guest. The distinguished guest did not appear pleased.

Introduction. The head of the dig, an archeology professor from McGill University, was looking at the distinguished guest with the expression he wore when confronted by an aggressive undergraduate. The distinguished guest, Canada's Minister of Culture, was asking question after question. As she did, the professor took her to look for herself, at the forge, and the slag pit, and the little midden beside Building E. New trenches were cut across the mounds and depressions, perfect rectangular cuts in the black peat; they could tell the minister nothing of what they had revealed. But she had insisted on seeing them, and now she was asking questions that got right to the point, although they could have been asked and answered just as well in Ottawa. Yes, the professor explained, the fuel for the forge was wood charcoal, the temperature had gotten to around twelve hundred degrees Celsius, the process was direct reduction of bog ore, obtaining about one kilogram of iron for every five kilograms of slag. All was as it was in other Norse forges—except that the limonites in the bog ore had now been precisely identified by spectroscopic analysis; and that analysis had revealed that the bog iron smelted here had come from northern Quebec, near Chicoutimi. The Norse explorers, who had supposedly smelted the bog ore, could not have obtained it.

There was a similar situation in the midden; rust migrated in peat at a known rate, and so it could be determined that the many iron rivets in the midden had only been there a hundred and forty years, plus or minus fifty.

"So," the minister said, in English with a Francophone lilt. "You have proved your case, it appears?"

The professor nodded wordlessly. The minister watched him, and he couldn't help feeling that despite the nature of the news he was giving her, she was somewhat amused. By him? By his scientific terminology? By his obvious (and growing) depression? He couldn't tell.

The minister raised her eyebrows. "L'Anse aux Meadows, a hoax. Parcs Canada will not like it at all."

"No one will like it," the professor croaked.

"No," the minister said, looking at him. "I suppose not. Particularly as this is part of a larger pattern, yes?"

The professor did not reply.

"The entire concept of Vinland," she said. "A hoax!"

The professor nodded glumly.

"I would not have believed it possible."

"No," the professor said. "But—" He waved a hand at the low mounds around them— "So it appears." He shrugged. "The story has always rested on a very small body of evidence. Three sagas, this site, a few references in Scandinavian records, a few coins, a few cairns. . . ." He shook his head. "Not much." He picked up a chunk of dried peat from the ground, crumbled it in his fingers.

Suddenly the minister laughed at him, then put her hand to his upper arm. Her fingers were warm. "You must remember it is not your fault."

He smiled wanly. "I suppose not." He liked the look on her face; sympathetic as well as amused. She was about his age, perhaps a bit older. An attractive and sophisticated Quebeçois. "I need a drink," he confessed.

"There's beer on the hill."

"Something stronger. I have a bottle of cognac I haven't opened yet . . ."

"Let's get it and take it up there with us."

Experimental Methods. The graduate students and volunteer laborers were gathered around the fire, and the smell of roasting hot dogs filled the air. It was nearly eleven, the sun a half hour gone, and the last light of the summer dusk slowly leaked from the sky. The fire burned like a beacon. Beer had been flowing freely, and the party was beginning to get a little more boisterous.

The minister and the professor stood near the fire, drinking cognac out of plastic cups.

"How did you come to suspect the story of Vinland?" the minister asked as they watched the students cook hot dogs.

A couple of the volunteer laborers, who had paid good money to spend their summer digging trenches in a bog, heard the question and moved closer.

The professor shrugged. "I can't quite remember." He tried to laugh. "Here I am an archeologist, and I can't remember my own past."

The minister nodded as if that made sense. "I suppose it was a long time ago?"

"Yes." He concentrated. "Now what was it. Someone was following up the story of the Vinland map, to try and figure out who had done it. The map showed up in a bookstore in New Haven in the 1950s—as you may know?"

"No," the minister said. "I hardly know a thing about Vinland, I assure you. Just the basics that anyone in my position would have to know."

"Well, there was a map found in the 1950s called the Vinland map, and it was shown to be a hoax soon after its discovery. But when this investigator traced the map's history, she found that the book it had been in was accounted for all the way back to the 1820s, map and all. It meant the hoaxer had lived longer ago than I had expected." He refilled his cup of cognac, then the minister's. "There were a lot of Viking hoaxes in the nineteenth century, but this one was so early. It surprised me. It's generally thought that the whole phenomenon was stimulated by a book that a Danish scholar published in 1837, containing translations of the Vinland sagas and related material. The book was very popular among the Scandinavian settlers in America, and after that, you know . . . a kind of twisted patriotism, or the response of an ethnic group that had been made fun of too often. . . . So we got the Kensington stone, the halberds, the mooring holes, the coins. But if a hoax predated *Antiquitates Americanae* . . . it made me wonder."

"If the book itself were somehow involved?"

"Exactly," the professor said, regarding the minister with pleasure. "I wondered if the book might not incorporate, or have been inspired by, hoaxed material. Then one day I was reading a description of the field work here, and it occurred to me that this site was a bit too pristine. As if it had been built but never lived in. Best estimates for its occupation were as low as one summer, because they couldn't find any trash middens to speak of, or graves."

"It could have been occupied very briefly," the minister pointed out.

"Yes, I know. That's what I thought at the time. But then I heard from a colleague in Bergen that the *Gronlendinga Saga* was apparently a forgery, at least in the parts referring to the discovery of Vinland. Pages had been inserted that dated back to the 1820s. After that, I had a doubt that wouldn't go away."

"But there are more Vinland stories than that one, yes?"

"Yes. There are three main sources. The *Gronlendinga Saga*, *The Saga* *of Erik the Red,* and the part of *The Hauksbók* that tells about Thorfinn Karlsefni's expedition. But with one of those questioned, I began to doubt them all. And the story itself. Everything having to do with the idea of Vinland."

"Is that when you went to Bergen?" a graduate student asked.

The professor nodded. He drained his plastic cup, felt the alcohol rushing through him. "I joined Nielsen there and we went over *Erik the Red* and *The Hauksbók*, and damned if the pages in those concerning Vinland weren't forgeries too. The ink gave it away—not its composition, which was about right, but merely how long it had been on that paper. Which was thirteenth century paper, I might add! The forger had done a super job. But the sagas had been tampered with sometime in the early nineteenth century."

"But those are masterpieces of world literature," a volunteer laborer exclaimed, round-eyed; the ads for volunteer labor had not included a description of the primary investigator's hypothesis.

"I know," the professor said irritably, and shrugged.

He saw a chunk of peat on the ground, picked it up and threw it on the blaze. After a bit it flared up.

"It's like watching dirt burn," he said absently, staring into the flames.

Discussion. The burnt-garbage smell of peat wafted downwind, and offshore the calm water of the bay was riffled by the same gentle breeze. The minister warmed her hands at the blaze for a moment, then gestured at the bay. "It's hard to believe they were never here at all."

"I know," the professor said. "It looks like a Viking site, I'll give him that."

"Him," the minister repeated.

"I know, I know. This whole thing forces you to imagine a man in the eighteen twenties and thirties, traveling all over—Norway, Iceland, Canada, New England, Rome, Stockholm, Denmark, Greenland. . . . Crisscrossing the North Atlantic, to bury all these signs." He shook his head. "It's incredible."

He retrieved the cognac bottle and refilled. He was, he had to admit, beginning to feel drunk. "And so many parts of the hoax were well hidden! You can't assume we've found them all. This place had two butternuts buried in the midden, and butternuts only grow down below the St. Lawrence, so who's to say they aren't clues, indicating another site down there? That's where grapevines actually grow, which would justify the name Vinland. I tell you, the more I know about this hoaxer, the more certain I am that other sites exist. The tower in Newport, Rhode Island, for instance—the hoaxer didn't build that, because it's been around since the seventeenth century—but a little work out there at night, in the early nineteenth century . . . I bet if it were excavated completely, you'd find a few Norse artifacts."

"Buried in all the right places," the minister said.

"Exactly." The professor nodded. "And up the coast of Labrador, at Cape Porcupine where the sagas say they repaired a ship. There too. Stuff scattered everywhere, left to be discovered or not."

The minister waved her plastic cup. "But surely this site must have been his masterpiece. He couldn't have done too many as extensive as this."

"I shouldn't think so." The professor drank deeply, smacked his numbed lips. "Maybe one more like this, down in New Brunswick. That's my guess. But this was surely one of his biggest projects."

"It was a time for that kind of thing," the volunteer laborer offered. "Atlantis, Mu, Lemuria. . . ."

The minister nodded. "It fulfills a certain desire."

"Theosophy, most of that," the professor muttered. "This was different."

The volunteer wandered off. The professor and the minister looked into the fire for a while.

"You are *sure?*" the minister asked.

The professor nodded. "Trace elements show the ore came from upper Quebec. Chemical changes in the peat weren't right. And nuclear resonance dating methods show that the bronze pin they found hadn't been buried long enough. Little things like that. Nothing obvious. He was amazingly meticulous, he really thought it out. But the nature of things tripped him up. Nothing more than that."

"But the effort!" the minister said. "This is what I find hard to believe. Surely it must have been more than one man! Burying these objects, building the walls—surely he would have been noticed!"

The professor stopped another swallow, nodded at her as he choked once or twice. A broad wave of the hand, a gasping recovery of breath:

"Fishing village, kilometer north of here. Boarding house in the early nineteenth century. A crew of ten rented rooms in the summer of 1842. Bills paid by a Mr. Carlsson."

The minister raised her eyebrows. "Ah."

One of the graduate students got out a guitar and began to play. The other students and the volunteers gathered around her.

"So," the minister said, "Mr. Carlsson. Does he show up elsewhere?"

"There was a Professor Ohman in Bergen. A Dr. Bergen in Reykjavik. In the right years, studying the sagas. I presume they were all him, but I don't know for sure."

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing. No one paid much attention to him. I've got him on a couple transatlantic crossings, I think, but he used aliases, so I've probably missed most of them. A Scandinavian-American, apparently Norwegian by birth. Someone with some money—someone with patriotic feelings of some kind—someone with a grudge against a university—who knows? All I have are a few signatures, of aliases at that. A flowery handwriting. Nothing more. That's the most remarkable thing about him! You see, most hoaxers leave clues to their identities, because a part of them wants to be caught. So their cleverness can be admired, or the ones who fell for it embarrassed, or whatever. But this guy didn't want to be discovered. And in those days, if you wanted to stay off the record . . ." He shook his head.

"A man of mystery."

"Yeah. But I don't know how to find out anything more about him."

The professor's face was glum in the firelight as he reflected on this. He polished off another cup of cognac. The minister watched him drink, then said kindly, "There is nothing to be done about it, really. That is the nature of the past."

"I know."

Conclusions. They threw the last big logs on the fire, and flames roared up, yellow licks breaking free among the stars. The professor felt numb all over, his heart was cold, the firelit faces were smeary primitive masks, dancing in the light. The songs were harsh and raucous, he couldn't understand the words. The wind was chilling, and the hot skin of his arms and neck goosepimpled uncomfortably. He felt sick with alcohol, and knew it would be a while before his body could overmaster it.

The minister led him away from the fire, then up the rocky ridge. Getting him away from the students and laborers, no doubt, so he wouldn't embarrass himself. Starlight illuminated the heather and broken granite under their feet. He stumbled. He tried to explain to her what it meant, to be an archeologist whose most important work was the discovery that a bit of their past was a falsehood.

"It's like a mosaic," he said, drunkenly trying to follow the fugitive thought. "A puzzle with most of the pieces gone. A tapestry. And if you pull a thread out . . . it's ruined. So little lasts! We need every bit we can find!"

She seemed to understand. In her student days, she told him, she had waitressed at a café in Montreal. Years later she had gone down the street to have a look, just for nostalgia's sake. The café was gone. The street was completely different. And she couldn't remember the names of any of the people she had worked with. "This was my own past, not all that many years ago!"

The professor nodded. Cognac was rushing through his veins, and as he looked at the minister, so beautiful in the starlight, she seemed to him a kind of muse, a spirit sent to comfort him, or frighten him, he couldn't tell which. Cleo, he thought. The muse of history. Someone he could talk to.

She laughed softly. "Sometimes it seems our lives are much longer than we usually think. So that we live through incarnations, and looking back later we have nothing but . . ." She waved a hand.

"Bronze pins," the professor said. "Iron rivets."

"Yes." She looked at him. Her eyes were bright in the starlight. "We need an archeology for our own lives."

Acknowledgments. Later he walked her back to the fire, now reduced to banked red coals. She put her hand to his upper arm as they walked, steadying herself, and he felt in the touch some kind of portent; but couldn't understand it. He had drunk so much! Why be so upset about it, why? It was his job to find the truth; having found it, he should be happy! Why had no one told him what he would feel?

The minister said good-night. She was off to bed; she suggested he do likewise. Her look was compassionate, her voice firm.

When she was gone he hunted down the bottle of cognac, and drank the rest of it. The fire was dying, the students and workers scattered—in the tents, or out in the night, in couples.

He walked by himself back down to the site.

Low mounds, of walls that had never been. Beyond the actual site were rounded buildings, models built by the park service, to show tourists what the "real" buildings had looked like. When Vikings had camped on the edge of the new world. Repairing their boats. Finding food. Fighting among themselves, mad with epic jealousies. Fighting the dangerous Indians. Getting killed, and then driven away from this land, so much lusher than Greenland.

A creak in the brush and he jumped, startled. It would have been like that: death in the night, creeping up on you—he turned with a jerk, and every starlit shadow bounced with hidden skraelings, their bows drawn taut, their arrows aimed at his heart. He quivered, hunched over.

But no. It hadn't been like that. Not at all. Instead, a man with spectacles and a bag full of old junk, directing some unemployed sailors as they dug. Nondescript, taciturn, nameless; one night he would have wandered back there into the forest, perhaps fallen or had a heart attack—become a skeleton wearing leathers and swordbelt, with spectacles over the skull's eyesockets, the anachronism that gave him away at last. . . . The professor staggered over the low mounds toward the trees, intent on finding that inadvertent grave. . . .

But no. It wouldn't be there. The taciturn figure hadn't been like that. He would have been far away when he died, nothing to show what he had spent years of his life doing. A man in a hospital for the poor, the bronze pin in his pocket overlooked by the doctor, stolen by an undertaker's assistant. An anonymous figure, to the grave and beyond. The creator of Vinland. Never to be found.

The professor looked around, confused and sick. There was a waist-high rock, a glacial erratic. He sat on it. Put his head in his hands. Really quite unprofessional. All those books he had read as a child. What would the minister think! Grant money. No reason to feel so bad!

At that latitude midsummer nights are short, and the party had lasted late. The sky to the east was already gray. He could see down onto the site, and its long sod roofs. On the beach, a trio of long narrow high-ended ships. Small figures in furs emerged from the longhouses and went down to the water, and he walked among them and heard their speech, a sort of dialect of Norwegian that he could mostly understand. They would leave that day, it was time to load the ships. They were going to take everything with them, they didn't plan to return. Too many skraelings in the forest, too many quick arrow deaths. He walked among them, helping them load stores. Then a little man in a black coat scurried behind the forge, and he roared and took off after him, scooping up a rock on the way, ready to deal out a skraeling death to that black intruder.

The minister woke him with a touch of her hand. He almost fell off the rock. He shook his head; he was still drunk. The hangover wouldn't begin for a couple more hours, though the sun was already up.

"I should have known all along," he said to her angrily. "They were stretched to the limit in Greenland, and the climate was worsening. It was amazing they got that far. Vinland. . . ." He waved a hand at the site—"was just some dreamer's story."

Regarding him calmly, the minister said, "I am not sure it matters."

He looked up at her. "What do you mean?"

"History is made of stories people tell. And fictions, dreams, hoaxes—they also are made of stories people tell. True or false, it's the stories that matter to us. Certain qualities in the stories themselves make them true or false."

He shook his head. "Some things really happened in the past. And some things didn't."

"But how can you know for sure which is which? You can't go back and see for yourself. Maybe Vinland was the invention of this mysterious stranger of yours; maybe the Vikings came here after all, and landed somewhere else. Either way it can never be anything more than a story to us."

"But . . ." He swallowed. "Surely it matters whether it is a true story or not!"

She paced before him. "A friend of mine once told me something he had read in a book," she said. "It was by a man who sailed the Red Sea, long ago. He told of a servant boy on one of the dhows, who could not remember ever having been cared for. The boy had become a sailor at age three—before that, he had been a beach-comber." She stopped pacing and looked at the beach below them. "Often I imagined that little boy's life. Surviving alone on a beach, at that age—it astonished me. It made me . . . happy."

She turned to look at him. "But later I told this story to an expert in child development, and he just shook his head. 'It probably wasn't true,' he said. Not a lie, exactly, but a . . ."

"A stretcher," the professor suggested.

"A stretcher, exactly. He supposed that the boy had been somewhat older, or had had some help. You know."

The professor nodded.

"But in the end," the minister said, "I found this judgment did not matter to me. In my mind I still saw that toddler, searching the tidepools for his daily food. And so for me the story lives. And that is all that matters. We judge all the stories from history like that—we value them according to how much they spur our imaginations."

The professor stared at her. He rubbed his jaw, looked around. Things had the sharp-edged clarity they sometimes get after a sleepness night, as if glowing with internal light. He said, "Someone with opinions like yours probably shouldn't have the job that you do."

"I didn't know I had them," the minister said. "I only just came upon them in the last couple of hours, thinking about it."

The professor was surprised. "You didn't sleep?"

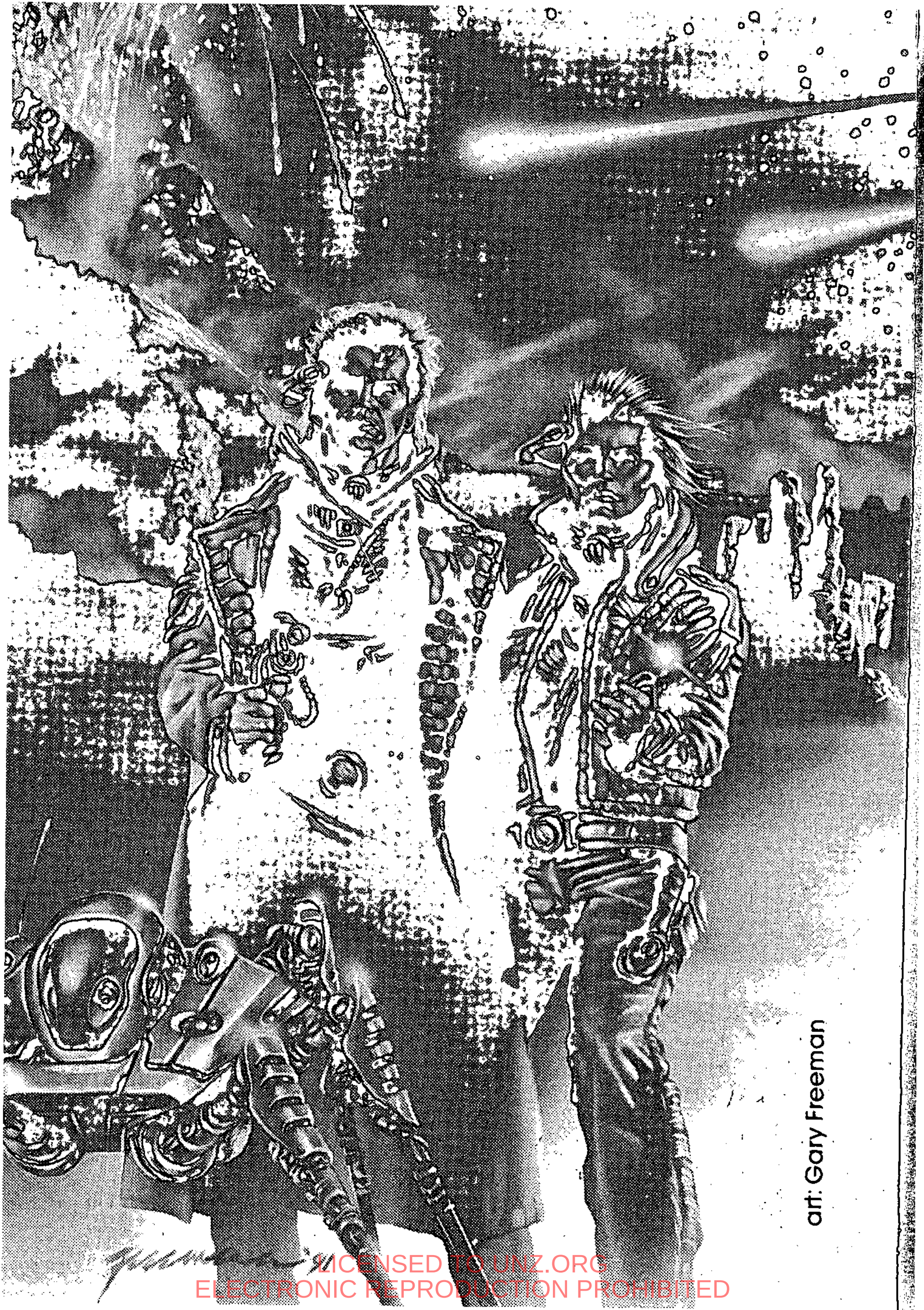
She shook her head. "Who could sleep on a night like this?"

"My feeling exactly!" He almost smiled. "So. A *nuit blanche*, you call it?"

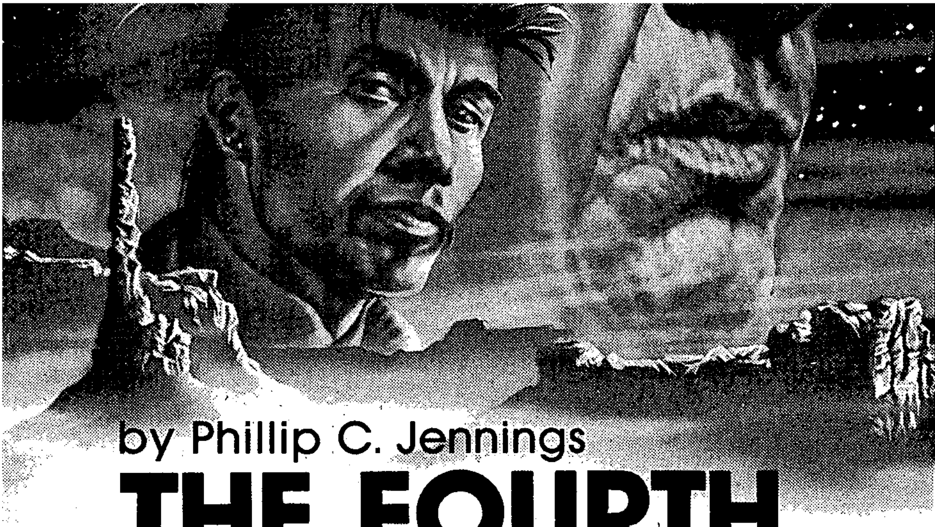
"Yes," she said. "A *nuit blanche* for two." And she looked down at him with that amused glance of hers, as if . . . as if she understood him.

She extended her arms toward him, grasped his hands, helped pull him to his feet. They began to walk back toward the tents, across the site of L'Anse aux Meadows. The grass was wet with dew, and very green. "I still think," he said as they walked together, "that we want more than stories from the past. We want something not easily found—something, in fact, that the past doesn't have. Something secret, some secret meaning . . . something that will give our lives a kind of sense."

She slipped a hand under his arm. "We want the Atlantis of childhood. But, failing that . . ." She laughed and kicked at a clump of grass; a spray of dew flashed ahead of them, containing, for just one moment, a bright little rainbow. ●



art: Gary Freeman



by Phillip C. Jennings

THE FOURTH INTERCOMETARY

The following tale shares the same milieu as the author's earlier story, "Blossoms" (August 1991). "The Fourth Intercometary" is an enthralling tale of danger, romance, and hard-edged science fiction on an exotic and unforgettable Mars.

Mars hung huge in Phobos' sky, illuminating a moonscape of white tubeways and slate-dark shielding. A forest of solar collectors lay almost out of sight behind the horizon. Ahead, three Essex-class shuttles sat squat amid umbilical connections.

Trailing the pilot, two suited figures bounded up a not-quite-transparent tube to the first shuttle's passenger deck. "We could still switch to a random launch plan," Arundhati said as she pursued Morse Bragolio's half-swimming form. "It won't delay us long to let a computer decide our fate."

Arundhati's powerful norm muscles worked easily against this moon's trifling gravity. She moved with a smoothness that belied all fear. *How to explain my lack of jitters?* she asked herself. *Am I too stupid to believe in the chance of my own death*?

It's more crass than that, she decided. The money and time spent getting here, the gadgetry lavishing their shuttle—it would be too horrible a waste if all that was blown away by some crackpot enemy. If the authorities on Mars *really believed* they were at risk, they'd—What? What were their choices?

In contrast to her adroit advance, her shorter boss clambered gracelessly, his legs jerked into motion (it seemed to her) by a series of conscious commands. Morse Bragolio had no rhythm, and little sense that he moved differently than anyone else. His white shockley hair was dyed brown, a futile disguise, since the face it crowned was deeply grooved and rubbery of feature. The man was a genius, but his talents were less than universal. Egotistical though he was, in some ways he had no self-awareness at all!

And he lacked charm. "We've talked this over. If *they* don't know which of the three launches I'm in, they're least likely to shoot down the first, for fear it's a stalking horse. They know we know that, and you might suppose that makes it the least safe after all, but once you enter these convolutions, there's no end of them. Easier to kill me down on the planet. Or make a seemingly sincere attempt."

"We don't know what to think," Arundhati responded, faithfully quoting her belowside liaison. "These hostile feints could be playacting as you've guessed. Even so, the weapons are real." Flattery was always in order. "You're a major resource to humankind. This media circus you've arranged—you're making it easy for your brother—"

Morse talked over the last word to erase it. "Why not? It gives *us* control to stage these dangerous moments inside a security box. Uh, how do these confounded straps work?"

Arundhati got her boss snugged in time for the brief launch, little more than a drop-away from the tiny moon. *And now to Mars, our new home! If we make it.* But they were committed, and worrying about interceptor missiles couldn't help. It would just wear at her, eating holes in her courage. There must be other things to think about!

Arundhati spoke: "Viewscreen on, please." Below and behind them, the great molten wound of Isidis Planitia shone with its own light through a haze of turbulent clouds, the target of one comet after another. The Martian crust was three times as thick as Earth's, but under repeated blows it had cracked open. Eons from now the planet might even have tectonic plates.

Thanks to Isidis and the thunderheads it fostered, the land beneath the Essex-1 was the greenest, warmest part of Mars. Up ahead, the "high country" of Tharsis and the old volcanos would eventually become the major continent, rifting in two if Mariner Valley began to widen. Time would bring the polar oceans into balance, shrinking the Throxus and flooding the Boreal to double size.

What thoughts these were! Hopes worthy of a planetary engineer! Visions worthy of the people who seized comets and aimed them with uncanny accuracy!

This present Mars was sixteen years old, with seventeen years to go. These were the middle ages, the middle decade of the fourth intercometary. Comet Proehl was well inside Saturn's orbit, and spiraling down. When it hit Isidis with gifts of ice and gasses, any colonists not in exile would batten down to hibernate, their cherished garden libraries reduced to shelves of fruit seeds.

Proehl would be followed by Yildiz-Kaya three years later. Ten more months would pass before the first adventurers came out of their tombs.

Four long Martian years would separate the fourth and fifth intercometaries, a literal dark age. Arundhati sighed, thinking of the cherished mementos she'd left behind her, back on Earth. Better for her if they'd been destroyed by a comet, taken from her by an angry fate, burned and buried.

She'd betrayed them, auctioned them or given them away, all for her career. They called to her, an eighteenth century floor-stand mirror, a Victorian mantel-clock, a twentieth century Pasternak; treasures of unacceptable mass. *You can still come home*, they said, and it was a lie.

Three facts: Father was tragically, unrestorably dead; Mamaji was a Krishna-bhakti gone from Winnipeg to haunt the Ganges; and home was Mars. Yes, home was Mars. It was seventeen years from now, and Arundhati's things were boxed in a Martian igloo at the very moment of doom. An epic video played in her head—a cometary glow across a midnight sky, a blinding flash of light, then quakes and lava plumes and dust and floods.

The igloo was gone in an instant. The cameras of Arundhati's imagination rolled on while she sat confined to this crash seat, waiting for someone beyond the forward edge of the planet to maybe shoot a missile at her, and end all these apocalyptic fantasies.

She wondered if Morse pondered even grander visions. Suited as he was, it was impossible to tell. Equally it was impossible to tell whether the stiffness of a normally stiff man meant that he was afraid.

Afraid? Excited? You don't give a research facility like Gledhill Labs to a shockley without some sense of fate; as when you give an orchestra to a conductor, or a great ship to a sea captain. Metaphorically, Morse was a bridegroom, looking forward to his great wedding, to his *directorship*. What powerful ideas surged through his brain?

On the half of Mars that included Fournier LTO, it was night when the shuttle landed, a classic tail-down onto frequently scorched pavestone. People pointed from the observation deck, finding the Essex-1 as arresting as its passengers found the lava fields that glowed along the horizon. "I want that background in the press tapes," Morse said, touching helmets with Arundhati. "It makes the planet seem less livable."

Here at last! Arundhati felt like championing this world that hadn't killed her: if it was worth the risk of her life, it was worth loving. "Things grow here," she answered. "Lots of genetically adapted vegetation. Try to daunt new colonists. Some will persist in coming, and they're got enough people here already. Enough to reseed the fifth intercometary."

"And all doing their damnedest to hamper research. 'Anything too dangerous to do on Earth is too risky for Mars.' Idiots! Must we wait for the pilot to debark?"

"We'll go first. How do you feel?"

Morse thought before answering. "Strong. We'd be noodles in Earth gravity after such a long trip."

"Our suits are adjusting to outside pressure. What about your ears?" Arundhati persisted.

"Young lady, I'm no tuber. I can take pressure changes as well as any norm. In loading us shockleys with handicaps and neuroses, your people saw fit to be generous with a few particulars."

Arundhati could hardly blush, not noticeably with her pitch-black skin. "It looks like they're hooking up the gantry to our exit. If you'll stay in the whiteroom I'll go first and see to the press."

Almost she expected a response: *Careful, you're all I've got until the next two shuttles come down.* A norm might have said that. This particular shockley held silent.

He knew she reported to him, but also to the power structure here on Mars, the PMC. She'd liaised into that structure even before meeting any PMC leadership, by virtue of her job. She was Igor to Morse's Doctor Frankenstein, but she was also the new director's nanny, because all shockleys were kept under watch. And that was fine. Morse didn't expect personal loyalty from norms. Words like treason and betrayal meant little to him.

On giant khod-wheels the gantry rolled away from the shuttle with its two whiteroom passengers, and did a slow pirouette before telescoping into its new target. During these minutes the usual sultry recording went through the usual welcome: "*—and on Comet Trinity six scholars had their fantasy quests translated into six colors of fruit, and took the liberty of seeding the prefectures of Mars when their comet hit the planet, so now there are fans of Red Antonia, and Yellow Taddeo, and Black*

Hassan—" Morse sat behind, enduring the lecture, while Arundhati made her way into the LTO terminal.

Mars!—and Martians! The place had its own low-budget grandeur, like the international showcase of some Central Asian satrapy. The wallboards blinked through their cycles, no paper posters here. Paper was a lot more expensive on Mars than back on Earth.

A vidcam crowd awaited, drab in their ankle-length overcoats. Arundhati felt self-conscious about the different style of her shuttle suit; form-fitting and plastic-white. *Hey, okay, I'm from another planet, right? What do I know?* In the rush of questions she asked her own: "Who's official here? We want to set up a press conference. How about out on that deck? How's the 0_2? We don't want airsnoods, and we'd like lava in the background."

"Er, customs first." A take-charge type shooed the press away with promises. On Arundhati's signal, Morse clambered down the passageway in relative privacy, to be scanned and briefly questioned.

Customs was a walk-through separated from the main waiting area by nothing more than a metal rail. Various official icons were mounted on the back wall. Most prominent were three group photos; five norms, five dime-diminutives and five snomos. The flag of Mars was modeled on the flag of Earth, red in place of blue, and the two moons and a ring of satellite mirrors instead of the open laurel wreath.

The larger room beyond the metal rail was windowed on three sides. A glass airlock led outside to an observation deck. There the vidcam jockeys clustered, now that they'd been herded off, most of their cameras on standby: they were saving their tape for the press conference to come. Security people stood among them, and if Arundhati's boss expected a big reception, they were it. The other clots of humanity were here for their own purposes. They were curious only because chance had dropped an Essex-1 out of the skies, and some wandered close.

One of the curious was a tall young tuber, pink and overplump and nervous, garishly half-clad under her open overcoat. Her snood hung loose around her neck. Arundhati saw her peek at the shuttle, then at Morse, then at the shuttle again.

Morse hardly noticed her, though any other man would have looked with interest at such a mix of beauty, breasts and bad taste. She had a young, pretty face, although she seemed insecure. Too bad it was hard to maintain ideal proportions under point three eight gees, because with some diet and exercise . . .

Arundhati hadn't yet completed that thought when the woman drew a gun from her snood. She had no time and no options, just dive forward and thrust her body in front of the shockley she worked for. Of course.

The killer got off two firecracker-shots before someone tackled her; two plastic bullets from a contraband single-action plastic gun, not high caliber, and not necessarily lethal. Bad luck this time, or Arundhati would have lived instead of fountaining blood out of the hole in her neck.

The pain! Hot blood ran down her arms. Arundhati's profligate heart beat on, pumping her hopes away. She sprawled onto the red-slicked tile. The chief customs officer leapt over his barrier desk. "Get her to the columbarium! Kumar, Annabel! Somebody patch in a Code Red! *Subitu! Saltu!*—it looks like an artery!"

Arms seized her off the floor. Ceiling tiles whipped past her view, dimming until the universe went black. That was the last Arundhati remembered, before her soul was copied and saved to disk.

The LTO columbarium was a small chapel with a memory helmet, a blank cartridge dispenser, and a temporary holding shelf. After the long minutes of memory transfer, the duty chaplain plugged her into a free cable and shut the door, hurrying off to vomit, and leaving the blood and mess for the daytime staff to deal with.

A ghost voice soothed Arundhati as she sat shelved between her lives, in utter sensory deprivation. *You have been saved to a state-of-the-art cyber-compatible medium. Your memories have been translated via UNESI protocols, upgrade twenty-nine dot two. If this default procedure was taken against your wishes you have the right to be magwiped following an obligatory . . .*

It might have been Arundhati's own thoughts, except for all this press of detail. It told her things she didn't know about Martian law. It said she'd be offered new flesh; the body of (pause for an update, hand typed letter by letter. Pause for L-i-s-b-e-t- -H-u-m-e, the woman who'd killed her.)

Arundhati could stay as she was, a cyber-brain "bug" with all sorts of sensory and mobility options, or she could become a tall, good-looking, overweight female tuber. Data about Lisbet Hume flooded in at nineteen point two kbaud. When this offer was formally extended it would not be an easy choice to make, because Lisbet was of borderline sanity.

That meant something was wrong with her brain chemistry, but maybe not. She was smart, but she was the mental runt of her overachieving family, and she had an *incredible* need to prove important; by lying, by show-off stunts, and now by trying to murder the new director of Gledhill Labs.

Arundhati's *bug-versus-Lisbet* choice would be redundantly explained to her by a local judge, and she'd answer the offer "yes" or "no." But not yet. Not for days to come.

Until the Essex-2 and Essex-3 came in, Morse was on his own, with no cheerful norms to run his errands this next hour. Damn! Arundhati fretted, thinking of the trouble her boss could get into—but why bother thinking about him, when he was certainly *not* thinking about her? Why delude herself? What they'd had was less than friendship, and never could be anything more.

Welcome to Mars, Arundhati thought to herself. Or was it her doing the thinking? All this stuff streaming through her consciousness—none of it came tagged; *this* datum from outside, and *this* from her own mind. Still she recognized her own sense of irony. *All this work to get here, and now I'm dead. Not a good omen.*

Arundhati was wrong to suppose that Morse had dismissed her completely from his thoughts. As might be expected of a shockley, he resented being deprived of her services. Petulantly he initialed the form that let the locals carry her former habitus off for compost, remedying the deficiencies of Martian soil.

But laying these emotions aside, it was interesting that the murder had been attempted. It left things up in the air. To make no try on Morse's life would have proved that his brother Lester wasn't that upset to be forced out of Gledhill Labs.

Morse had seen pictures of the place, all ice and snow, greenhouse panels and storage tanks, the externals giving few clues to the empire of practical research hidden inside. To give Gledhill away without threats and bloodshed would make people curious, and someone would look deeply into Lester's endeavors.

Now that chain of possibilities had been diverted. Lester could skulk off with his secrets intact. So he'd hope, perhaps not realizing how devious norms could be. Bringing Morse to Mars had been a norm plot, hadn't it?

These weren't comfortable thoughts, and Morse found the idea of his twin brother quite vexing. They had identical XY chromosomes, clones L and M out of a batch of sixteen Bragolios. Morse hated his fifteen siblings sight unseen. They were thieves of his potential fame.

Five were at the pinnacles of their diverse fields and hard not to read about. Lester had almost reached that status, and Morse was pleased to see him quashed. But still there was that odious fact of genetic intimacy . . .

Lester would be very like Morse in looks. A showdown was not to be borne. Given that Morse was still alive, Lester should soon hurry out of Gledhill, evacuated to wherever losers go. Superannuated research. Doomed projects. All those would go too.

"The attempt to apply proprietary methods to programs of public interest . . ."—words like that would paper over the changes. One main reason Morse was in Gledhill, and Lester was out, was that he'd kept his norms happy with fluff talk.

He made his speech and posed for publicity shots. A few kloms away a train was being put together, ten boxcars loading with foamstone for transport south. His own eleventh car would carry the gear he'd brought, and his core staff.

A slow passage to Hellas, then a slow voyage by sea to Gledhill; all gave Lester time to make his escape. Dignity was at stake here, and for a shockley, dignity was life. No, they mustn't confront each other. Lester had to know that. He must be driven by shockley urges.

But Lester had "gone bad," bad enough that Gledhill had been taken away to be Morse's new fief. Morse fretted at the thought that his unknown brother might not act predictably.

Morse was prodded out of these meditations by a burly man in a customs uniform, a norm or a tuber of some dark-skinned ethnic group.

"Sir? Come look at this. Emma says these boxes aren't on the import list . . ."

He led the way, this man with his weight-lifter's shoulders. Morse followed around the corner. Telephones, restrooms—what could be *here?*

Emma nodded, a dime with a clipboard, an expression of sour dislike worn into her wizened-child's face. The black man's hand closed over Morse's mouth, and his other arm hoisted him off the floor.

A door stood open into a tight, deep cyber-closet, one of those anonymous service doors that eyes are trained to ignore. Seeing it ajar was like suddenly discovering a new world, a more fundamental reality behind the stage-props of Fournier LTO. The dime woman shut it behind them, dancing clear of Morse's legs as he kicked clumsily, banging his toes. He flailed in the dark, shockley dignity be damned, but his powerful abductor was careful not to swear out loud as he stuck a memory helmet onto Morse's head.

Moments later Morse ceased to struggle. Shockley or not, it took twenty minutes to copy his soul, the same as any other kind of human.

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To Yossi's left, the video screen flickered with the colors of background lava. Patterns of hot light played across the porter's desk and into the aisles of overnight storage. Yossi Jardac squinted, claim-tag in hand, watching the attendant tuck his bag away with proper care.

Yossi listened to the news with half his attention, if only because his would-be brother-in-law showed up from time to time. What was this? Some happytime media event? Would Manager Randolph Mbika be there, preaching jobs and progress and a bright new future?

"Rarely do comets erase a world's greatest features!" the speaker orated in a shrill voice. "An ocean as shallow as the Throxus of Mars shifts age by age like a slow amoeba, but *Hellas*—Hellas will continue to be its deepest basin."

Lord bloody haysause, Yossi thought to himself. *Is this a speech, or a lecture?* Don't make them guess where your passions lay, Randolph always said, but this guy—

Yossi peeked around at the screen. He saw a face as pink as his own under an unruly mane of brown hair, with predatory eyes and a hawklike nose. It was the face of a shockley, bred for genius but certainly not for show. The speaker's shoulders were tense, his fingers clutched the lectern.

Poor sod. I'll give him another minute, Yossi decided, hoping to see the man make a fool of himself. The attendant returned and angled the screen to make it easier to watch.

The shockley grew less strident, trying not to get in the way of his words: "Born of an impact a billion years ago, Hellas is a symbol of constancy on a world of cometary assaults no less brutal for the fact that they are scheduled and carefully targeted. Thanks to these assaults, long-buried seas have thawed and life has put down roots.

"In this sixteenth year of the fourth intercometary, overflooded Hellas is dotted with islands in a long crescent. Gledhill lies at the eastern verge, Gledhill Labs at its crest. Why am I drawing this map for you? Because too many voters think scientific research is a menace to safety."

The shockley lost his place, and spent long seconds finding it again. "So let me assure you on several counts. First, Gledhill Labs is quarantined, fourteen hundred kloms from the nearest rail terminal . . . ."

Around that MarsBelt rail terminal, a city was rapidly growing on Hellas's northern shores, doubling in numbers every year. It sprawled without a center, yet by any definition Eisenroth Chapterhouse sat on its edge.

The Chapterhouse was a big gray foamstone igloo, supported by guild dues, mandatory and non-refundable. Captain Yossi Jardac was a cash man, not someone who got by on *zalatwic*. He liked money to work for him once he'd gone to the trouble of earning it. He could afford better lodgings than the Chapterhouse offered, but because of his extorted dues he slept here, part of the unlovely crowd. One cash per blanket and two for a pillow was a lot better than seventy cash for a room of his own along the Dimetown ring.

Weary of Morse Bragolio's speech, Yossi tipped the attendant for his trouble. It was a slow news night, and Yossi was too tired to play chess with Sargon XIX, too tired for a shot and chaser in the Chapterhouse lounge. He paid for bedding, moved down the hall to the central wardroom, found an upper bunk and settled in.

Male seafarers outnumbered female on the usual ratio of sixty to ten. Sequestered by sex, the women had a choice of doubles or quads. Men dormed in an open barracks that stank of alcohol, fish, and flatulence. Two tubers kept up a mutual third degree across the dark upper bunks. The idiots thought themselves inaudible because they spoke Japanese.

Wrong.

In the lower bunk, Jemal the Egyptian snored away; snockle, snuf-pu-pupp; fwee, plap-hoooEE, ch-chng; an amazing range of repertoire.

The hotbox gave off a rippled glow visible to norms, but Yossi wasn't a norm. Sleeping without tiepatch augments over his eyes, it was just the source of a hot iron-and-dust smell he liked, the smell of windmill-generated warmth.

Yossi wasn't a norm. He was a cheap and sour tuber who mused on his morning revenge. At oh four hundred he'd rise and dress: he was a fisherman, after all. The chattering Japs would be asleep, but he'd do some extra clumping around their bunks. He'd make "music," loud sounds of zippers and velcro as he suited up to go out into temperatures of sixty below.

Let them bitch. God, they were two peas in a pod—what did either find to talk about that the other didn't already know? "Shut up!" Yossi growled. "*Silentu!*" Not nice of him, but people were pretty well agreed that he wasn't a nice man. Why bother redeeming himself? Maybe they were right.

The talking tubers couldn't pretend not to understand elementary Esperanto. They fell into a startled hush. Yossi almost got to sleep. Then the Finnish boy staggered into the dorm, singing: "The bug fell in love with the baobab tree—"

Lord bloody haysause.

When Yossi thought about it, it amazed him that more than half the seamen here were norms. Norms never got drunk, or forgot their manners. Why did they endure so much loutishness? It was well within their rights if they sued for their own wardroom, and left tubers like him to their miseries. He'd have done it if he could.

And we deserve it, Yossi thought. *Unimproved raw humans, more vices than virtues.* Mars had been promised as a tuber haven, like Texas had become a home for wild rhinos extinct in Africa. And tubers were damn rare on Earth, but the story wasn't much different here; twelve thousand genetically untampered "natural humans" cozened along as an insurance policy for the human species.

Tubers were a burden ninety thousand Martian norms carried in case their genetic diddling turned out to be a mistake. Yossi worked hard to be a useful, hard-nosed Martian, because he hated to think of himself as mere *backup.*

Did norms laugh at him? Did they take him for a mug from the stone age? No, that kind of spiteful belittling—that's what *tubers* were like. Yossi had to admit it. But it was important not to succumb to mulish pride, and turn vice into virtue. He'd been through that stage already.

He liked to think he was intelligent about his self-hate, and no longer neurotic. He was evenhanded, anyhow. *Us tubers are shits, but snomos are worse*—and *they'd* been edited and "improved!" *Then there's shockleys! Talk about screwed up!*

Yossi heard a snort from below. Praise God! His own snoring had woken Jemal up. The Egyptian rolled over. For Yossi on the upper bunk, the effect was like a marsquake. Where was he? He tried to let his thoughts drift on some new course . . . .

Oh yes. The news. Tonight's news had been full of that new immigrant. Rumor had it shockleys hated each other so much they never had sex. Each generation was bred from scratch. Put two in the same room and they'd go nuts!

Five human editions lived on Mars. Norms, tubers, snomos, shockleys, and dimes—*dime women.* In the dark, Yossi smiled. Swarming over each other in their dimetowns—the way they liked to gangbang around . . . .

Yossi closed down that part of his mind. No sense getting hot and bothered. He'd visit Dimetown next weekend. That would take care of those particular needs.

Outside the Chapterhouse, the temperature plunged. Frost crystallized out of the fog-saturated air, thickening on surfaces or falling as snow. The

Throxus Ocean groaned and crackled, *salogok* with embedded *migalik* swelling, sheering, and lifting out of a lubricant of grease ice that froze and shattered under new pressures; shotgun snaps and compression squeaks too distant to hear from the far side of the tidal ice jumble of the *alam al-mithral*. The beautiful, deadly *alam al-mithral.*

Fruit eaters don't dream. Deep sleep is enough, and deep sleep is all they get. After five hours Yossi woke, his need for rest satisfied. He put on his tiepatch and swore at the time display. He swung down to the cold floor and donned thermals to make his run to the bathroom.

Afterward, he put on his wigglesuit, urine transfer, bottoms, top, boots, hood, airsnood, gloves, and overmittens. A few norms on early schedules began to stir, but Yossi beat them all. He was ready for the Brave New Mars of the Fourth Intercometary, and all its lethal beauty.

Messages, the tiepatch blinked, the word overlaid on reality. *Greta Jardac to Yossi Jardac.* Already? Yossi shook his head unhappily, because a quick decision meant that his sister had taken that job on the edge of high country.

Goodbye to his piggyback rides. To the extent that Yossi had a social life, she'd done it for him, parties full of the aimless talk that led to friendships, and in turn to *zalatwic*: a Polish word for an economy of favors, the kind friends do for each other.

Zalatwic worked so well for norms like Greta that they hardly needed money. They were halfway to the utopia where it was *from each according to her abilities, to each according to her needs.* Yossi was too sleepy to pursue these thoughts, which didn't have much to do with him, anyhow. But shit, he hated to see Greta go.

Better she should have married Randolph right away. How long did norms stay fertile? Greta had gone into puberty at seven—seven Martian years—just like a tuber girl would have done, but did that mean she'd hit menopause in her early twenties?

If they'd done more brother-sister living together he'd know the answer, but being of different editions . . . yeah, he'd been a jerk about that; his pale skin versus her melanin-boosted perfect black. Sour temper or not, Yossi was a sweetheart now, compared to how he was back then.

He paid the sleepy attendant one cash to get his shopping bag out of overnight storage, and counted his boxes with a businesslike air. *Someone* had peached a snood-filter and some mitten liners from him a couple of weeks ago. He had no intention of letting it happen again.

Yossi left the Chapterhouse igloo through the airlock passage, braving the shock of unearthly cold. Dimetown lay behind and out of view, as was most of the other—how to say it? On Earth people would insist that this conurbation of cultures and editions deserved a name. Eisenroth, perhaps, or Helujon, after its dimetown. After all, it was the biggest port on the Throxus. All its parts *were* named, and Drumlin Avenue took Yossi steeply down between red/green marker barrels, into a desert of sculpted ice.

The *alam al-mithral,* Arabic for a world halfway between reality and the realm of ideals, a world whose shapes were full of meaning. This was beauty! Even here on the temperate northern shores of Hellas, Mars's not very salty southern ocean sheeted over every night, junking the strand with ice floes, a God-sized jigsaw puzzle dumped out in careless heaps.

The newest slabs squeezed the older ones inland. They effervesced over time, wind-shriveled into distressed coronets, spires, and jester hats, melted plastic monsters, and Salvador Dalí nightmares. All this was aged, but now Yossi reached the part where the younger maze loomed high, melding into—

His empty stomach was making itself felt, and his metaphors were beginning to tend toward swiss cheese and layered flipflop tortes. He disappointed himself. Maybe if he ate more Red Antonias, he'd learn to be a poet.

He switched his bag to the other arm and hiked on. Moving out from between the ice-heaps, Drumlin Avenue became the great curl of Eisenroth Dock. The land fell seaward, but Yossi kept on the level. His tiepatch gave him some vision near an ocean that steamed fog through its cracks. The *alam al-mithral* dropped away and his vista opened.

He was exposed. The Martian winds hit him, but they were mountain-thin even at sea level. He was strong enough to walk against them.

Captain Yossi Jardac. Captain because that little overshadowed thing out there was *his* ship; his and the bank's, and now his morning beauty-walk was over. He'd have to fight the night's cold to wake that ship up.

But not so much cold, because the liquid depth of the Throxus was a torrid two degrees celsius. The *Tipsy Witch* never endured much below that, wallowing by the dock, her backup intelligence stored overnight in her deeply plunged anchors. She was well designed to work out her lifetime. Yossi's investment was paying off, a thought that cheered him as he climbed aboard.

Better yet, there was time to build more cogs of her size and squeak a profit before the end came. Randolph—should he think of him as *lonely* Randolph now—The Honorable Randolph Mbika had helped him work out the numbers. He urged Yossi to file them with the bank. They were tight numbers, but if the fish didn't betray him he'd be okay, fickle fish, not predictable like comets.

Comets, to destroy everything. Snomos pawing through our wreckage. Yossi drew energy from such irksome visions. He sprayed the carburetor with a fresh blast of ether, and gave the cord another tug. The bilge-pump chuffed a few times. Another tug, and another. At last the motor caught.

Slush pulsed out the hose. He straightened up. No snomos here on the shores of Hellas, where the Martian air was thickest and the temperatures most naturally warm.

Yossi smiled at his thoughts. The *Tipsy Witch* was a fishing cog by choice, an icebreaker by necessity. Such was warmth on Mars.

Most importantly, important enough to repeat, the *Witch* was a ship. "Ships" stood fast against the solar tides that made a colossal white maze of the *alam al-mithral.* "Boats" were light toys carried inland after each use. Yossi's *don't-call-her-a-boat* was experimentally small, but she held to her moorings next to the huge *Berrieh.* She deserved her captain's pride, the pride of a man who took fresh stock of his love and hates most every morning.

His sister's message gave him reason to do so now. He was sure the words would hurt: and they did. *"Randolph will tell you—we had quite a talk. Too many promises got made when we were kids. It takes lots of promises to get people to Mars, and sometimes promises were heard that were never spoken. It's not just snomos who live in high country. And snomos aren't one tenth as bad as you think. They have good hearts. Well anyhow, Randolph can tell you some options about visiting me once I've set up. He'll tell you things I can't E-mail, too. I only wish there were two of him.*

"I love you. I'm cashing in zalatwic *for you, so expect some invitations to keep you busy. An order from your sister: Don't ignore them! I've got my reasons. Keep safe."*

In unfocused response, Yossi opened his snood and spat. His spittle stayed liquid on the deck for seconds before it froze. You'd never see *that* an hour before a high-country dawn. Spit shattered up there!

Greta had bought the universal love ticket. *"Good-hearted snomos!"* Snomos were hardy—yes, he'd concede their bodily virtues. But they were drunks. White-furred and shaggy, they grunted for conversation. Their music was a monotonous thunk-thunk-thunk. They searched for wild fruit and ate them indiscriminately, heedless of their colors, merely to note their seeds' sale value. They even ate Blue Gisbornes. And Greta was moving to the edge of high country just to traffic with them!

"Norms'll do anything," Yossi said out loud, his voice muffled. He didn't begrudge his sister's superiorities, her resistance to disease, her talents, her underlying *simpatio.* Greta had been good to him, with that casual goodness that expected the best of everyone, and usually got it. But he was glad he didn't see life through her rose-colored glasses.

Yossi wondered if his jaundiced tuber-outlook gave him an evolutionary edge in the long run. That would gratify him, because right now norms had it over tubers, despite biased policies that made it easy for Yossi to borrow money for the *Tipsy Witch.* The bank was keen to help him grow rich, so people could showcase him. "See? Tubers can do it. Tubers are okay!"

Yeah, you bet. Yossi looked around. Cold fog steamed from black fissures between scabs of ice. Navigating the Throxus required instruments; radar, sonar, satellite. Or it would, if the planet's little southern ocean were crowded with ships. As things were, Yossi liked to run out blind. It wasn't the best way to harvest fish from the prolific shoals he'd found, but who knew what *better* sites he'd find by playing around a few mornings every week?

He had economic room, and sea room. The sky was turning light and the last of the night skimmers had skated in. He climbed into the pilot house and rang for power. Then he tapped the cast-off macro and hit the RETURN key.

That's how he liked it early in the day; no pretenses. No fictoid Scotty in the engine room, no fictoid Smee tugging at the ropes, answering voice with jolly voice so he could think he wasn't alone. He was satisfied to hear the rumble of his twin screws and the squeak of hull lifting on ice, and held his breath until the *Witch* rode that first powerful thrust down and forward, out to where black slushwater dominated the *migalik* floes and the seas were rich with life.

Out to the "broad bosom of Hellas." Yes, Yossi liked that. He started to mellow, thinking himself a rare man. A seafarer on Mars! License #312 out of barely a thousand in the worldwide guild! Ah, if only there were unknown shores, home to strange rich kingdoms! Something to compensate for his miserable Chapterhouse nights.

But his days were good. His days. Who could beat his days!

Yossi's entire pilothouse-galley rode on gimbals. It held horizontal as the *Tipsy Witch* moved out to open slushwater, well into Hellas Bay. Yossi wheeled to port. Several hundred meters below these waves lay a transitional margin rich in fish; a border between crater-slope and the old flat dune country that distinguished Hellas back when Mars was dry and dead.

The sun began cooking away the fog; a crazy sun that lurched with the sky as the seas rose and fell awesomely. The baseline of Martian waves—the distance from trough to trough—averaged twice as long as those on Earth, so no ship since the ill-fated *Eisenroth* herself could possibly even out the up-and-down action by her own length. More thrilling was the fact that Martian waves could surge higher, more massively, at sharper angles of slope, than any terrestrial counterparts.

But they moved slowly. Yossi was used to that, and used to the fact that he rarely saw the "forward" part of his ship's forward motion. Except when she crested high, it was possible to speak of claustrophobic seas, and feel halfway like a submariner, shut up in a tight can of narrowed horizons.

A ship in a hurry would never sail these high waves, nor crunch through heavy ice too close to shore. A ship in a hurry had remarkably few choices, but Yossi had neither goals nor deadlines; not until his bitchbox crackled. A voice spoke to disturb his pleasure. *"Gledhill Labs to* Tripsy Witch. *Gledhill Labs calling—"*

"That's *Tipsy. Tipsy Witch!"* Yossi answered. "What do you want? Hit me, turkey."

"Copy, Tipsy Witch. *We have an emergency. We need you to run—this is closed beam, by the way—to run some people out of Gledhill. You're the closest ship right now, and there's three hundred thousand cash for your inconvenience. You may not be stocked for an eight day trip . . ."*

"Damned right. This isn't a yacht."

"But we have supplies here, and nothing dangerous in mind," the voice persisted over Yossi's interruption. *"It's just that Director Bragolio has to evacuate before his brother gets here. Hit me."*

"Ah."

"Is that all? Just 'ah'? *Look, I'm telling the truth. On my honor as a norm and a Ph.D., and whatever else I have going for me: this is safe, and it's big cash for you. You got lucky, the closest blip on our screens. You'll do the new director a favor too, preventing an embarrassing face-off. Hit me again."*

Yossi's voice softened. "Say on. Where are we going?"

"Um, that *I can't tell you. But it won't take more than eight days. Sorry. Director's orders, I have to keep our secrets. You know shockleys."*

"No place in this ocean takes eight days to get to. The Throxus isn't that big." Yossi paused and spoke again. "I want to see you. Visual. Hit me."

The speaker's face came over, line by line, filling the screen. He was genetically tailored black of skin, a norm as he claimed, and in an uncertain universe norm honor counted for something. *"Okay?"* he said. *"My name is Hasday Ghazzabi. Check me out if you like, but don't take so long someone else blips on my screen."*

"Uh, yeah, I copy. But I don't have a lot of space. I've got a fish hold and a weather deck, and room for four or five people, sleeping two to a shift. Hit me."

"We're not in a position to choose. Repeat; three hundred thousand cash."

Yossi felt like arguing the price. It was customary. But this offer was so far beyond measure that he'd feel like an idiot wheedling for half a million.

"Copy on eight days, three hundred thousand cash, name of Hasday Ghazzabi. I'm coming," he answered. "I'll check your credit on the way, and not waste time. I figure thirty hours. Don't anybody eat beans tonight."

"Fine. Over and out."

"Okay," Yossi said softly to the dead air. After a pause he spoke again. "Navscreen A, give me scale from here to Gledhill Island."

The screen lit up with a grid map. Yossi's course was predestined. To get anywhere fast he had to turn inward and fare along the *migalik* ice fringe. He traced the next ten hours on the touch-sensitive surface.

"Copy to command memory," he said. The *Tipsy Witch* might have answered *"I hear and obey"* or something cute, but Yossi didn't like cute. He said "Replay" to make sure his orders were correctly stored.

Then he turned to the bitch-box and called Randolph, top priority rates. That ought to get the guy out of bed!

Randolph answered in less than five minutes: *"Yossi? Is that you?"*

"About Hasday Ghazzabi. Is he okay?" Yossi answered cryptically, to save connect time. "Is he good for his money? Hit me."

"No parting words for your sister? Greta's here. She says hello."

"Hi right back. But as long as I'm paying business rates, what about this Hasday fellow?"

A pause. *"I've nothing against Hasday. He's Lester Bragolio's nanny and general factotum. Lester's in a spot, he's being kicked out—relieved of his directorship. Are they asking for transport? The new chap's hired the* Berrieh. *Morse will be loading all day today. They'll launch tomorrow. She's a faster ship than yours. Over."*

"Copy. I'll beat her, no problem. Why didn't somebody work this out a few days ago? I'm being hooked on the fly."

"Because some crazy woman was supposed to kill Morse. Shockleys play rough, worse than tubers. But I don't think Hasday was involved in that. I can't vouch for all Lester's gang, but I've dealt with him, and he couldn't be. And if he thought you were being brought into danger, he'd have to warn you. It's simple ethics."

"And pay me something outrageous for the risk?" Yossi asked.

"If they've offered an unexpectedly high fee, that might be a warning," Randolph answered. *"Pretty subtle, though. It's more likely a symptom of Lester's panic. Greta says to be careful. Over."*

Wouldn't Randolph like to know *how* high that fee was! Yossi grinned at this chance of a lifetime. "Tell her I'm only eating Greens, Yellows and Reds. You can't get more careful than that. Over and out."

This last talk reminded Yossi that he was hungry. While the *Tipsy Witch* steered herself, he opened the keeper and pulled out a Yellow; good practical eating.

This one was from a Y-71 bush; Taddeo doing chaos theory. He was a short, bald academician of heavy face and figure. Virtual reality brightened to show four fictoid students perched around him in chairs less padded than his, sipping tea and nibbling biscuits.

They asked the right questions with the intelligent innocence of Lit majors who had wandered into the wrong room. The lesson made headway as efficiently as a Platonic dialogue, slowing when Taddeo made a dumb joke to prove that teachers were human.

Ironic, yes. Taddeo Tsimis had been a veg brain-nexus, genetically adapted to life on a comet. Notwithstanding how he imaged himself, he hadn't been human for many lifetimes!

Still, his blood ran hot. Chaos and fractals—this was rad stuff. Physics had purged itself, backing away from the repercussions of quantum theory, because the things people ended up saying sounded so nuts. Thanks to Yellow fruit these buried controversies were in the open again, no longer squelched by the orthodox elite.

True, Yellow wasn't as fun as some other colors, but nobody said you couldn't eat a Red or Green for desert, and end up in some fantasy epic, clobbering orcs or sneaking into a palace harem.

And really *being* your own point-of-view hero had an improving effect. As a kid Yossi had been hateful and selfish, but Pavel's tolerance and self-sacrifice got overlaid; Pavel of the Green fruit, a hero capable of courage and growth.

Green Pavel had character and Yossi benefited, and as far as his pinched and sour heart allowed, he was grateful. The people who wanted to censor fruit were half-right. They did make a difference, or what were they good for? And so he'd follow Pavel's search for his girlfriend, while Red Antonia led the guy a merry chase on her half-assed quest for God. Yossi was willing to tag after, happy to find Pavel an honest skeptic.

So far, his Green alter-ego had not fudged his way into piety. The fabled God-Fruit, where one or more of six seekers re-entered the Garden of Eden, remained unfound, its color contested. It couldn't exist because God didn't exist, however much seed hunters looked for undiscovered fruit bushes in the wilder regions of Mars.

Eden was the goal of six colors, and six adventures; but it couldn't exist, even if much of the planet's economy was driven by this search for wonderful new seeds. Now Greta was part of that economy, heading off to run a trading post and haggle with snomos.

What a state of things. But Yossi had lost his right to bitch, because the tables were turned. It was his new job to ferry a shockley somewhere eight days away, and that shockley had tried to arrange a murder—if Randolph said so, it must be true. Better to pal around with a hundred snomos than share quarters with someone like that!

He'd do it anyhow. Three hundred thousand cash was utterly persuasive. "Have I got a deal for you," Yossi whispered, as if he were some non-existent God talking to a lean, curly-haired sailor on the Throxus of Mars: strange stuff to be at the center of a rapidly expanding financial universe.

It was late the next day when the *Tipsy Witch* jammed into the icepack skirting Gledhill Island and fired her anchors. Yossi radioed his arrival. He began pumping slush over the port side, and waited.

A procession wove down through the local *alam al-mithral*, bundles visible through gaps in the ice maze. Yossi set his tiepatch to 10x and saw snomos; ape-brutes shambling under their heavy burdens. All well and good, but he wasn't going anywhere until three hundred thousand cash was transferred and verified, so somewhere in that long parade had better be at least one norm—there!

Yossi checked on his pumping operation, and was disappointed. The weather was too bright and warm for his slush to freeze into a high-mounding boarding ramp. All he'd created was a pedestal, flat and tannic, dirtier than the rest of the ice, as if the *Witch* had peed from a gigantic bladder. He'd have to winch people and goods aboard.

The first of them filed out from the *alam al-mithral* onto the frozen sea-shelf. Yossi waved, and Hasday waved back. "Humph," Yossi grunted, turning into the pilothouse. He'd had a social thought, the kind that came more commonly to norms: his passengers would like something hot to drink when they came aboard. He programmed the pots, and then went to limber out the winch.

Hasday and his partner were the first to ride up and swing aboard.

"This is Bai Shan," said the norm, as the other fellow pulled down his snood. "We need to inspect your boat—your ship, and figure things out, okay?"

"Hot caf in the pilothouse. Let's begin there. There's credit transfer to take care of." Yossi looked at Bai Shan, a tanned tuber with a grim air about him. Bai stared back, nodded to Hasday and said "Go ahead."

How frugal. In two words Bai granted permission while excluding himself, and it looked like Hasday didn't mind at all. The norm followed Yossi inside and warmed his hands on a cup. Yossi showed him the two bunks. "It'll just be Doctor Bragolio and me and Bai Shan in here," the norm said. "Four, counting you. Liv and Tubs would find it insufferably hot, and hot snomos get pretty rank."

"You're bringing *snomos?*" Yossi asked. "They'll get seasick outside. God, where can we put them?"

"Bai's working on that. You have an empty fish hold? Liv and Tubs can stay with our gear. It makes sense, since we're using them as porters."

Yossi tried to imagine enduring the tossing seas in a closed dark hold, the stink of fish all around him. Meanwhile Hasday spoke again. "Here's my card. Gledhill Labs, priority account thirty-four dash one nine two."

A *priority account!* That meant hard UNETAO money. Priority accounts weren't shilled on any vidnet. They tapped into the interplanetary financial system. The Martian micro-economy was walled off for protection, with a one-way flow between hard and soft currencies. Yossi was delighted to soak in that flow. He radioed for a bank connect. The bank blinked to life, and a woman's voice said "Ĉu mi helpas vin?"

Oh, God. "Mi volas uh, transferi monojn . . ." (out of, out of) ". . . *el* tri kvar unu nau du, kaj—"

"Card, please?"

Yossi slotted Hasday's card, and then his own. The transaction progressed to the next stage, and the next. He hard-copied each screen, and then they were done.

Bai Shan entered the pilothouse, and shucked off his snood and coat. Undoubtedly the gun strapped to his torso was meant to impress Yossi. He poured some tea and turned around. "Send the signal."

Hasday didn't zip up his coat. He just poked outdoors, and fired one of the *Witch*'s flares as if he owned her. Yossi kept his mouth shut. Clearly the norm had noted where the flares were, and knew how to use them, a man of competence. But he persisted in acting like Bai Shan's underling. That just didn't make sense.

After the flare spluttered and died in the blue-black sky, the crest of Gledhill Island erupted in a blast of flame and noise. A hopper shot into the thin Martian air, following a curved trajectory up and down again. The procession had long since clotted into a crowd of people and goods by the side of the ship. They watched the hopper land, ice hissing under its retros.

The air rang with sudden silence. The cockpit opened and a single figure climbed out. "I'll get the winch ready," Hasday volunteered, zipping up this time before leaving the pilothouse.

For the moment Yossi and Bai stood side by side. "I don't get it," Yossi said. "Hasday acts like your puppy-dog."

Bai smiled, but not with his eyes. "It's like those cartoons. The Director's got an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, pulling the opposite way. I'm the Director's little devil. Poor angel Hasday can't do anything about me, just set a good example. You notice there's no norms around Gledhill? Except Hasday, of course."

"Yeah?" Yossi said to prompt Bai, who may have felt he'd said too much for a tough guy. "So—"

"That's how the Director likes it. You a fruit eater?"

How could Yossi lie, with his keeper full of evidence? "Yellow, Green, and Red."

"Yellow's good. You'll understand the Director better if you eat Yellow. I do Blue when I want kicks. All that other goody-goody shit isn't real to me."

Blue Gisbornes. It was like confessing he was evil. Certainly it confirmed Yossi's suspicions. *Someone* took care of trying to assassinate the new Director. Who but Bai Shan?

A minute later, Lester Bragolio swung aboard and accepted Hasday's escort up to the pilothouse. Yossi bowed, but the shockley hurried by without loosening his weather-hood, through the galley to the bunks beyond.

His rubbery face looked grim, which may not have meant anything. After a moment Bai Shan followed his boss. Meanwhile, Hasday turned back. He climbed down to the deck to winch up the next passengers, a pair of snomos, white and shaggy.

Yossi was content to watch, until Hasday handed the winching operation over to the snomos. The crowd below began loading the net, and Yossi grew nervous. He suited up, went outside, and bumped into Hasday coming the opposite way. "Uh, are they qualified—?"

"Sure. Liv Sjoberg and Tubs Najarian. Don't sweat about *them!* It's the rest of us who'll give you headaches. Will we freeze in for the night if we take two hours to batten down?"

"I doubt it," Yossi answered.

"Good. I'll tell the Director. Sorry if he seems like a jerk, but he's lost his job. I'm surprised he's not catatonic."

During these words, Hasday somehow swung Yossi around. The captain found himself re-entering the pilothouse. Now what? He double-checked the *Tipsy Witch*'s instrument readings, and watched the fuel gauge notch toward full. Okay, what next? Time ticked on oppressively.

Director Lester Bragolio stepped out of seclusion, clad in tunic, breeches and slippers, hairbrush in hand. He spoke while combing his tousled white hair. "Would you bring up the navscreen, please? Ten degree radius?"

The *Tipsy Witch* held faithful to Yossi's voice. He said "Navscreen A, grid out from Gledhill, ten degree radius." Only then did the monitor come to life. "False color, please," Yossi instructed. His own "please" meant "end of command." Language changed when one talked to machines. Spoken as the Director said it, the word almost signified: *you are the same to me as some piece of equipment.*

Yossi shrugged off petty provocations. Paying customers could get away with anything, even "please" and "thank you." He spoke again. "Alternate five seconds of depth contours with five seconds of water temperatures."

The screen showed ten meter intervals for the first map, and two degree intervals for the second. The shockley studied it and turned to Yossi. "If I touch where I want to be eight hours from now, can you draw the course?"

Yossi nodded and watched his finger. "East." He stepped up to the screen and drew a line. "Copy to command memory." Without changing his tone he went on. "Eight days east will take us almost to Kepler."

"You know your ship's speed better than I," Director Bragolio—*ex*-director Bragolio—answered evasively. "We'll be sailing an elaborate course; not one you'd think efficient."

What was this? Polite chit-chat with a *shockley?* "It's your choice, as long as you don't risk the ship," Yossi answered.

Bragolio gave him a searching look. "We'll be spending a long time together. Perhaps we'll end up talking about . . . God? Would that come as a surprise?"

"I'm no believer," Yossi answered quickly, hoping to shut off this line of talk. The last thing he wanted to deal with was a shockley evangelist—what a monster *that* would be! "You can't prove God exists, or that he doesn't. That makes it non-falsifiable. Somebody way back proved that non-falsifiable claims are meaningless."

"An excellent answer. Most tubers don't care to labor in theological gardens, not even to justify their prejudices. Although they'll happily *use* those prejudices to burn other tubers at the stake."

Yossi felt his face grow warm. "Some tubers acted that way, a long time ago. They were the ancestors of us all; snomos, shockleys, norms—"

"But they had defects. Captain Jardac, *I* have defects, too. I was made defective. Shockleys can't plot together to take over the solar system, because we can't stomach each other. We can't stand to have equals. Each of us must be the tinhorn god of our own domain. If by the push of a button, I could eliminate all shockleys but myself, I wouldn't hesitate.

"Does that startle you?" he went on. "Imagine then, what it must do to an ego like mine, if I find myself drawn down a road that leaves me fewer and fewer choices. Imagine I'm obliged to extrapolate that God exists; a being not merely equal to myself, but vastly superior! A being for whom the entire universe is a memory device!

"Well, you can't imagine it in the least, but consider my predicament. I'm made as I am. The fact of God is intolerable to me. My brother is coming to take over the administration of Gledhill. I must be gone before he arrives. How maddening if your ship foundered, and we shared the same place for any length of time! But I have to share this universe with God. That's more maddening still! God spying on me; *knowing* my intimate thoughts!"

Yossi frowned. What a weird conversation! Maybe this was how shockleys socialized: by spinning tirades. He hesitated to enter into the Director's madness, even to ask the obvious question: "But what can you do about it?"

Lester Bragolio clapped his hands once, to signify some finality. "Conjure up a keyboard with ten keys. Now, picture a four-fingered hand, three of space and one of time. How many chords could you play? How many more, with your fingers differently arranged?

"There are that many potential universes. I shall recognize the ones that don't have a God. Perhaps opening the door will *create* such a universe. Well, I'm not suicidal, so rest assured I'll be at work a long time yet. But that's what this relocation is about. Hasday has reported me to the powers-that-be on this supposedly open research planet. That's his job, to cut my resources when I get too big for UNETAO's ambitions. Thanks to Hasday, they've decided I mustn't persist in my endeavors, and here we are."

"Yours is the last generation of mad scientists," Hasday spoke. "There won't be more. The geneticists tried to create beyond their competence. We're all a lot humbler than we used to be."

"Ah, yes," the shockley said. "That pathetic Luddite bleat. How I wish I could be rid of you." He changed to a more matter-of-fact voice. "As for shifts; Captain Jardac, you and I should make one team, Bai and Hasday the other. There'll be some overlap, of course. Does that meet with your approval?"

"Sure." If someone had to watch the ship while he slept, Yossi much preferred Hasday to anyone else. But for now he wanted this bizarre interview to be over. As quickly as possible he begged off to go outside and see what the snomos were up to.

Liv was the female. Big as thumbs, her dug-nipples sagged into view, any other distinctions of shape muffled under her heavy fur. Making love to her would be like—Yossi recoiled, amazed the idea had occurred to him. She smiled while wrestling a crate toward the hold. The naked skin around her blue eyes and button nose was pink and cutely wrinkled, like a baby gorilla's. "Hi, Skipper. Wanna help?"

To his own surprise Yossi agreed. They steered the crate away from obstacles until Tubs reached to lower it down. Now what? Yossi found himself more curious than repelled: "How can you carry all this from wherever I put you off?"

"Well hell, that's a good question," Tubs answered, his voice a basso rumble. "A damn good question. A marsokhod would be nice. I'm licensed for nuke vehicles up to three axles. Liv, what do you guess there'll be a khod?"

"Either that or the place we're bound for ain't far inland," Liv guessed. "It's not like anybody tells us these things." She stretched the kinks out of her back. "I don't suppose you can pipe radio into this part of the ship?

Buddhist-Cajun bottleneck? Or Newfie sea chanties? We got tapes, but it's sure nice when we can hear something new."

Yossi shook his head. "Usually it's fish down there. I'll bear it in mind for the next ship I get built for me. Good meeting you, Liv. Call me Yossi."

Tubs leapt out of the hold. Even in Martian gravity it was quite a feat for someone two meters tall. He stuck out his paw—his hand. Yossi shook it, wondering how people who looked so weird could act so normal. "Maybe we'll get together for meals? Where are you guys from, anyhow?"

Liv shrugged. "Well, if you shoot due east from Eisenroth about seventy degrees, them's our old stomping grounds. We're doing this spot of work for the Director, and then we're heading back up there. We've seen enough of Mars. It's time we settled down, huh, Tubs?"

"You bet. Farming and fruit-prospecting. Beats working for shockleys."

Yossi grinned, feeling a rapport he could scarcely believe—rapport with these monsters! "Excuse me for bringing this up, but I just got an earful about God. I was wondering if you'd know about any special fruit—I mean, you must know about the legends, God-Fruit and all? I thought maybe the Director ate something?" *And if he did, you're the ones who brought it to him.*

Tubs's smile dropped away. "Now what lies should we tell Cap'n Yossi, Liv? And us not good liars in the least?"

"People get so fussed up when snomos pretend we've found something," Liv answered. "Honestly, it's a shame to lead them on."

"But denying it—that never works, dear. It's hopeless." He turned and spat over the rail.

"You said it, Tubs." Liv shook her shaggy head.

"People like to believe we got secrets," Tubs went on. "They pester us, and tempt us with empty baubles. Look at poor Uncle Ivar and what happened when he popped up with bush R-172! We make the finds, and sure as sin some little shit of a norm or a tuber gets rich, setting up greenhouses and hotmouthing how wonderful it is."

Tubs swung his attention to their host. "Anyhow, Cap'n Yossi, you've touched a sore spot. If you're looking for God, you're better off going to church like everyone else."

"Snomos go to church?" Yossi persisted.

Liv spread her paws. "What should I do with him, Tubs? I don't think we're working him hard enough. All this talk, and the Director in a hurry and everything."

The rebuke made Yossi worry. Had he undone the good work of these last minutes of civility? These two didn't have to know he was a misanthrope. For a moment they'd accepted him, and Yossi wanted that moment to continue. "Pardon me. Sorry if I, uh, said something stupid," he apologized. "Do you really need help? I could fetch Hasday."

"Nah, but we can't chat right now," Tubs spoke as he followed Liv to the winch.

With her hour in court fresh in memory, Arundhati woke to fleshly life, and blinked. The fog hazing her vision refused to go away. She was nearsighted; a tuber defect she'd be saddled with for the rest of this lifetime.

She stood and sat again, working her pelvis, pumping her lungs, wiggling her fingers. She felt—heavy. Too weak for her weight. Lisbet was in sad shape, something Arundhati meant to fix. But for now she focused on the chaplain, who put her through a brief set of tests.

"You're no *stultado,*" the chaplain grinned afterward. "922 verbal, 781 math. That's well within norm range."

"Thanks. What about my job? What about Morse?"

"Try on this tiepatch. There's a message."

Meeting 1500 sublevel 3, Concourse R room 112. "What time is it?" Arundhati almost asked, before she thought to tap up her chron-screen: 4/16 B7 12:35.

As if she might forget it was the sixteenth year of the fourth intercometary! But being new to Mars, she was glad to be reminded it was Braho, seven days down and forty-two to go before C-for-Ĉerenko, third of fourteen months. It was like that old folk song; " 'Twas the forty-third of May / that our Willie passed away. / He died harder than he ever died before . . ."

Except this time she was poor Willie. Again she looked around, pleased that this little room had a big view. Fournier Arcopolis was a domed hole in the ground, offices and shops in circles around a garden atrium. They all had big picture windows to tempt her curiosity.

No money. Another damn it. "My plastic won't work with my new thumbprint."

Her chaplain nodded. "You'll get an updated card. Uh, if you're hungry—"

"I'm *starving*. I've never felt so *hollow* before." Arundhati tried to smooth out her waist, but it wasn't just these stupid clothes that were foldy and convoluted, it was *her*.

"This is sublevel two. There's a deli straight up. Here, take this."

"Cash?" Arundhati asked, looking at the proffered paper. "I can't take it from you. If you fork charity over to every new resurrectee, you'll go broke in this job."

The chaplain shrugged. "You sound like my husband. You're right, but I'm building *zalatwic*. Now don't forget that meeting."

"At least you can eat with me," Arundhati suggested. She moved around the desk. "God, these thighs! I feel shock waves with every step. No muscle at all."

"Please, don't be vulgar. This isn't a planet for *muskolegistoj*. We're softies and we like to pretend there's nothing wrong with us. We measure strength by not noticing the temperature, and not needing our airsnoods very much."

"I'm sorry," Arundhati apologized. "Look, I'm bitchy, but it's not your fault. I'm really a very nice person. Anyhow I used to be. Hell, I'm a tuber now—do you suppose it's my destiny to whine like this?"

The chaplain didn't laugh. "Us norms shine with a bright light, so in contrast tubers seem shadowy. But if you took tubers by themselves, you'd find as much good as evil. We've done wrong by hogging all the virtue. It makes them neurotic. But you shouldn't have that problem, coming into this flesh as an adult."

Arundhati blushed. *Tubers and norms. Of all the 'us'es and 'them's in the universe, what the hell am I anymore?* "How long since Lisbet had a bath and change of clothes?"

"She wore prison issue this last week. A shower every morning. These were laundered in the meantime. You won't be offensive." The chaplain chewed her lip thoughtfully. "If I were meeting important people in that body, I'd go for an empire-style dress. High waist, silky with pleats—do you mind if we visit a shop after your lunch? I feel like a kid. You can be my fashion doll, and the owner of *LaVerne's* owes me a big one."

"I can't tell you how grateful I'd be," Arundhati answered. "This isn't my style at all."

Tastefully dressed and with the edge off her hunger, at fifteen hundred Arundhati waved goodbye to the chaplain. She slipped from a crowded concourse into a darkened room. The chamber was long and functional. Most of the seats were taken; the table that dominated this space had a place marked for her.

"Am I late?" she asked the woman in front of the display screen, whose look of intensity must mean something, perhaps disapproval. Characters in operas stared like that, and fell in love, or murdered each other.

"No. Welcome. I see you've got a tiepatch. Please put it on." The woman's black face was haloed by frizzy red-blond hair; she was a Minoan goddess painted in the wrong colors. Her face could be beautiful if the spirit was right, beautiful in expression, beautiful if she had a lively soul inside. For the moment Arundhati reserved judgment.

"Please put it on," the woman repeated, reminding Arundhati that she hadn't done so. She blushed and complied. A dime was already seated to her right. He smiled through his beard; a toddler-size adult. Or perhaps it was a leer. In Martian gravity Arundhati's large breasts didn't sag at all.

"Tap up screen one. It'll help introduce me," the norm woman said. "Mars has three *panĉajatoj;* one each for snomos, norms, and dimes. The norm panĉajato works with UNETAO to select nine members to a Planetary Management Committee, an executive force in Martian affairs. Most of the directors on several crucial boards are assigned by the PMC."

Arundhati's *screen one* showed an administrative flow chart. She frowned at its tangles. Meanwhile the woman spoke on: "One of these nine managers is the Honorable Randolph Mbika, the person I report to.

"My name is Greta Jardac. The population of Mars is too small to let us afford a secret service, but we're here today to launch a mission. Each of you is trusted to have the prudence and bold spirit we're looking for. What's at stake is the future of this planet: will it be a terraformed colony, or a cloud of hot plasma? Vlad, what do you think?"

The bearded dime stood on his chair and bowed. "I'm Vladmiro Balasov. Two hundred thousand dimes on Mars. More than twice the number of norms. To us, this PMC is a conspiracy for aristocratic rule during future intercometaries.

"We dimes prefer open debates, open elections. I'm the chair of the Conservatives, and my friends just got trounced at the polls. All this might have happened on a different world, for all the difference it makes to you giants, but it's Mars just the same. No mad shockley's going to take it away from us."

"The mad shockley being Lester Bragolio, not Morse," Greta explained to the room.

Arundhati nodded: "Morse figured his brother was up to something." *You're my connection to his fears*, she thought, *and to all that's left of my former life*. She felt profound relief. *This meeting means I won't be stranded in Fournier! I'm no orphan.*

"He's up to something indeed, with the help of Bai Shan, and against the opposition of Hasday Ghazzabi," Greta agreed. "Remember those names, if only because they stand for such different things. My own brother is busy ferrying Lester to his fallback location."

Greta windowed Yossi Jardac's statistics onto quad four of tiepatch screen one. "I hope to enlist Yossi when he gets back. He'll have crucial views. As for the rest of us, we have a base to work out of. Nominally it's a trading post. I'll be there as communications link. Arundhati, you—"

"I might be interested," she interrupted. "I was G18 on Earth. What's the pay for this?"

"If I take you as a trading post clerk, it'll be G10, with a bonus when we've accomplished our mission. You know, *ĉu ne,* that there's only fifty G18's on Mars? I'm just a 16 myself."

"Then I've lost my place with Morse," Arundhati said.

"That's one of the drawbacks of dying. The Civil Service code doesn't oblige UNETAO-funded employers to—well, if it did, the government might be stuck with some people forever. The very worst people! So unfortunately you need court sanction to reinstate your job status. In this case, a suit might drag on for years."

Greta smiled as if her notes read: *smile here.* Arundhati liked her better for it; people who said unpleasant things should have the grace to be nervous. She hurried on. "We'd favor that. We want you to seem desperate enough to take a G10 job. Meanwhile you've got a grievance against the Martian establishment. You might bitch to the media about norm prejudices against tubers. See, there's that tuber named Bai Shan I mentioned earlier."

Greta paused. "Forgive my crudeness, but he really goes for that body you're in. He's Lester's goon and he likes zoftig women. Having you play along might be helpful. Bai won't know you're trained as a science monitor and he might let you see things he wouldn't reveal under other circumstances."

"You know where all this is taking place," Vlad said. "You've got a trading post. You know where Lester is going."

"Yes. Tap up screen two, please." Greta's eyes changed focus as she consulted notes visible to her alone. "Our spot is almost certainly between thirty and fifty degrees south, and two-twenty to two-forty degrees of longitude.

"This is dull old Martian cratered terrain, on the fringes of snomo country. Those dots on your screen are several ruins from the second and third intercometaries, including the wreck of the *Carthoris*. They show as blips to our surveillance satellites, because we can see heat, metal, and unusual contours from space.

"Lester's facility, if it exists as more than a blueprint, is either dug in or masquerading as a ruin. Enough money has vanished from his accounts to pay for *something* forty times bigger than your average workshop, and if that's still laughably small . . ."

Greta shrugged. "That's only the money we've noticed. One more thought. Snomos may be camped nearby. Lester's employed snomos in the past. They probably have no idea of the dangers of his work."

"What *are* the dangers of his work?" asked one of the dimes, an hourglass-shaped female.

"He's trying to open an inter-dimensional door, a gate to other universes," Greta answered. "Potential universes exist in an equilibrium that would be disturbed by any such attempt. The result might be a Big Bang. If our universe shares dimensions with that Big Bang, energy would slice across. That slice would be the width of cosmic 'string,' ten to the minus twenty-seven centimeters, and I'd not want to share Mars with cosmic string at several billion degrees. I'd prefer not even sharing the galaxy with those forces."

"So is Lester suicidal?" Vlad asked. "If there's so much at risk—"

"Mars is an open research planet, and Lester's bred to do science. From Lester's view our side represents ignorance and bad faith, and he'd ask why we're so nasty, when in fact we're nice and polite, and very careful. Let me emphasize that." Greta turned from face to face. "Look everybody, we could land security patrols. They could wander around shooting things up, but until we know how far Lester's work has taken him, we don't dare do that. We've got a norm on the inside named Hasday Ghazzabi. He'll tell us when it's safe to shut Lester down."

"Meanwhile—?"

"Meanwhile, it won't seem odd if a bunch of election-losing dimes go off to found their own Dimetown, far from Fournier and other hotbeds of radicalism. You'd have good reason to show up at the trading post, hire guides, and hike around. That's our cover. And Arundhati might go with you."

Vlad twiddled his beard. "To make this credible the bank will have to free up construction loans for a new Dimetown. We'd like that money not to vanish when this mission is done."

"We'll work on getting some promises," Greta said. "Arundhati, are you in?"

"As sex bait? A treat for Bai Shan? I'd like to check out your attitude about tubers. This tuber brother of yours. He doesn't know about any of this?"

Greta grimaced. "Yossi's a crummy liar. If I'd told him we fiddled events so he could do what he's doing, he'd let it out somehow. He'd play for advantage and get squashed flat. I don't feel good about keeping him ignorant, believe me. It's a rotten deal, and I intend to make it up to him."

"But what can he do that's worth the risk?" Arundhati asked.

"Our satellites have lost the *Tipsy Witch,*" Greta answered. "We think they've sprayed the ship so it reflects as ice. We could do a heat trace, except—Arundhati, what do you know about the first intercometary?"

Arundhati sighed: "Mars 1/1 was the same as Earth year 2094—"

"Way back then they put big mirrors in orbit to warm the planet's surface," Greta elaborated. "They focus the solar flux down in patterns to keep the Boreal and Throxus oceans from freezing completely. We can't trace the wake of a ship that follows those zigzags, so for all purposes Yossi's lost. When he comes back, he'll tell us where he's been. We might need a ship on our mission. He can help there, too."

"If I joined you I wouldn't want to be manipulated because of any supposed tuber defects," Arundhati said. "Or kept in tactical ignorance."

"You won't be," Greta promised.

All Arundhati's ambitions had come to this! "Then I'll take the job. These guys killed me, after all. If I hang around Fournier I'll just run into old pals of Lisbet's. That could get embarrassing, given how she was."

"Crazy, you mean?" Greta asked.

"How can I persuade people I'm not her, when they're used to Lisbet lying so much?" Arundhati asked. "I just had a shop clerk tell me all about my former self! Lisbet wanted fame; and she's notorious, all right. She used to shoplift. What's she up to? You ought to interrogate her."

Greta opened her briefcase and stuck her notes inside. She looked up. "She's a bug now. Bugs *can't* be insane. It's not in the software. Except lots of times the change throws them into a shutdown fugue. On Mars we send our dead to the big bug monastery on Olympus Mons. She's probably out of the picture for the rest of the fourth intercometary."

"If there *is* a rest of this fourth intercometary," Vlad added darkly.

-4/16 Braho 8-

A mirror-reflected sun shone bright in the night sky as the *Tipsy Witch* crashed through offshore ice, the ship hoary and bearded with white. Yossi sat with his hands curled around a hot cup of caf, silent in his fury, glaring at Bai Shan.

Bai Shan had wanted to disable the *Tipsy Witch*'s radios, and was only forced into concessions by Yossi's threat to turn back for Eisenroth Dock. Thank God the ship obeyed Yossi's voice alone, or there'd quite possibly be a mutiny. His body would be easy to discard; just toss it overboard.

Bai stood only a meter away at the screen displays, keeping vigil and toying with map scales, using the keyboard to tweak the color contrast. He was unruffled, his mood unguessable, as if to taunt Yossi with his superior emotional control.

Hell yes, a man who ate Blues would have great emotional control, because he'd be dead to a lot of feelings that made life worth living. Why envy Bai that?

Hasday should have taken Yossi's side, instead of working a technical fix so the radio could re-start after an interval of time. What a *stultado!* Hasday's head worked oddly. Whatever the war between A and B, the norm angled across no-man's-land in direction C. Sometimes he became everyone's target.

Right now Hasday was bringing a late supper to Liv and Tubs, braving the remnant surge of these ice-tempered seas. The T-shaped floor of the pilothouse/galley was part of a gimbals-riding sphere that included indoor storage and equipment. If the windows hadn't been iced and useless, it would have been possible to swing the whole thing rearward, just to keep a watchful eye on the norm's difficult trip to the fish-hold.

Instead, Bai and Yossi looked at a display. Suddenly the monitor went dead. "Damn," Bai swore, tapping a few more keys before giving up. He reached for his outdoor top-and-bottoms. "Would you mind taking the com for a bit?"

Yossi looked back into the galley. The ex-director was apparently asleep behind the far curtains. He forced an answer. "Fine."

Half a minute later the odious Bai was out the door. Yossi tapped wet keys and felt around the display. Caf was mildly acidic. It could be spiked. Bai might have "accidentally" spilled some of his drink . . .

Yossi pulled out the keyboard. He looked for a substitute input device. With a grimace, he plugged in a mouse. Now how do you get a mouse to go Alt-F10? You invoke a menu you can't see, and click blindly.

The screen came alive. Yossi cleared it and windowed back to the stern camera. Bai stood by the winch housing, holding his gun, gesturing violently as Hasday moved toward him, arms out in a "let's be reasonable" posture. Yossi saw two flashes of brief color. Hasday folded in on himself, trailed by ghost images of his collapse.

Yossi stared wide-eyed. After some moments the tuber nudged Hasday with his boot. Bai holstered his pistol and began the cumbersome business of tumbling the corpse overboard.

It was too late to push RECORD. Yossi cast around and saw the keyboard. Again he pulled up the virtual key menu and moused Alt-F10, blinding the display. He unplugged the mouse and stuck the sabotaged keyboard back into place. Then he sat down, hoping to control his pounding heart.

Shouldn't I have some weapons in here? Yossi wondered, trying to size up his flare-guns, his kitchen knives—

The pilothouse door opened and he rose in panic. "There's no sign of Hasday," Bai said, pulling down his snood. "It's more than possible he was swept overboard."

The Throxus Ocean was three minute water. Only a snomo could survive the cold longer than that. Yossi tried to say "then he's dead." His role was to suggest a search, however futile. He readied to speak, but Bai cut him off: "It's no use hunting for the body. We can't bring his flesh back to life, and you don't have memory equipment."

"You killed him," Yossi blurted at last. His fear gave way to something light-headed. Either this was courage, or he was on the verge of fainting.

"That's a lie. It was an accident." Bai spoke without the passion such words demanded.

"We're going back to Eisenroth. I'll tell them what I saw."

"It would be inconvenient to kill you and disable your ship," Bai answered. "We're close to our goal, but it would add a twenty-klom hike across the ice to our difficult trek. The fact is, I'd rather not kill you at all. I'd like you to see things a new way. You could be useful."

Bai paused and then went on. "Let's talk about your three hundred thousand cash. When that was paid to your account, a performance bond was issued. You can't spend money for the eight days of our contract in case we end up dissatisfied.

"Now get this: we have lawyers back in Fournier. While we've been at sea, they've gone to court to keep your money frozen for a period of time—three hundred sixty-five days. Do you remember what that is?"

Yossi shook his head, stupefied by all that was happening.

"It's the length of an Earth year, and it shows how archaic these laws are we're working with. The point is, we're going to sue for our money back. That's what our people told the judge. Only we won't sue if you keep your mouth shut. Stay quiet and that hunk of cash is yours in three hundred and sixty-five days, plus a fifteen percent penalty.

"I'm depending on your greed. I'd hate for you to fail me. It's not just lawyers working for us. Our other pals are even nastier. We're talking *patriots*: zealots for Martian self-rule versus UNETAO colonialism. A man with a ship and fish to catch can't hide from that gang very long."

Yossi nodded, his mouth dry. He couldn't think of anything to say. Bai seemed familiar with this effect, as if he'd induced it many times before.

"Here's your program," he said. "In another two hours we anchor and begin debarking. Do nothing until we're off out of sight. Then you're free to break out of here. Make no use of your radio until you're inside Hellas Bay. Even then contact Eisenroth only for routine purposes. After you reach shore, make no attempt to charge us with any crimes. It's very simple."

With that said, Bai began brewing a new pot of caf. Yossi managed a response: "But why Hasday? Why tonight?"

"Hasday was a pain in the ass. He was a norm spy we had to live with, and for the sake of Gledhill we did. That's all I can tell you, but it's obvious we aren't in Gledhill anymore. Too much curiosity is dangerous. Go eat a Green or something."

Lashed by Bai's dismissal, Yossi moved to the far corner of the pilothouse. One of the screens showed a map, and he stared at an undistinguished shoreline. Bai couldn't rob him of his log, or his memories.

And three hundred thousand cash or not, Bai couldn't keep him from reporting Hasday's murder when he got back to Eisenroth Dock!

-4/16 Braho 10-

MarsBelt Railway stretched along the equator more than a hundred ninety degrees. Fournier was well east of midpoint, where the line curved south to avoid the molten sea of Isidis.

All the good seats on Arundhati's train were on the side facing comet-shattered terrain. She worried that the car would tilt from the weight of bodies pressed to the windows, watching the show.

But most of those bodies were dimes, and it would take three, maybe four dimes to equal one tuber like her. The train showed no sign of tipping over, so she shrugged off her fears and enjoyed the sight of geysers sputtering under thunderheads of smoke, with now and again the flash of lightning.

By late afternoon Isidis lay behind. The train whizzed through squares of field and mid-growth forest, passing farmstead clusters every five kloms. Rain pattered down at random intervals. Rain should never get boring on the "desert planet" of Mars, but once the myth died for her, Arundhati tapped into the train's tiepatch library.

Time passed. Arundhati's hunger became fierce. This body's new owner was used to Earth-size meals, and it was hard to make the shift. By lengthening the Martian minute, there were exactly twenty-four hours in the local day: the adjustment was slight, but it put Arundhati off in her reckoning. She always expected it to be later than it was. Late enough for supper.

At last the noodle-woman came trundling through. Arundhati bought a bowl of soup and a bun. Her companions snuck glances as she ate. She read their minds: *"Huge woman puts on another load."* Dimes were censorious of waste. They objected to giants on principle, but sin has its charms. She knew she was the object of any number of wicked male fantasies.

Those fantasies made her desirable, and now Vlad returned from some errand to take possession of her; he was a halfway competent charmer, good enough for a small planet, and on a small planet he might never be disabused of his exaggerated self-views. Arundhati found him tedious, but she was trained not to dislike people far worse that Vlad: shockleys like Morse, for one.

He climbed into the facing seat, sat heavily, and puffed: "Marsupials!" Of course she'd have to ask what he meant. She could hold off coldly, but not if they were to work together these next weeks.

So she raised an eyebrow. "You said—?"

His eyes twinkled. "They used to be the big faction among the radicals. If dime women were endowed with marsupial pockets, they could bear *very* premature babies. That's good, because we've got size problems with the birth canal. You don't see dime geniuses because our heads have to be small, but wait until the fifth intercometary!"

Vlad lowered his voice. "—This is all their propaganda, but women have conservative aspects. They don't want alewife hips, but think of this pocket across your front! Imagine it stretching with the weight of a child, losing tone and flapping like an empty sack!"

Arundhati wrinkled her nose at the idea. "Let men carry the babies."

Vlad smiled. "The human race is infinitely improvable," he continued mockingly. "But the big marsupialist catchword is 'maternal bonding,' which gets us men off the hook."

"I take it they're not a serious faction anymore?" Arundhati asked.

Vlad nodded. "Our progressives have come up with something better. What if women deliver after two months, and give birth to pockets with the fetus inside? Then they send the whole womblet off to the incubator! No ruined figures, no fuss."

"No need for breasts," Arundhati pointed out, but Vlad shook his head. "Breasts stay. For the hatchlings, and for a sexual cue. Oviparosity has lots of advantages. The radical bloc has swung behind it. I think they're nuts. Technology isn't ready for that big a change to the human species. But all *they* see is a crop of huge-headed kids, smart as norms and perfectly adapted for Mars, where it doesn't take a lot of muscle to hold up a lot of brains."

"Couldn't your conservatives found their own Dimetown, and go your own way?"

Vlad pursed his lips. "But I might need to build a coalition with the diehard marsupialists, just to populate the place. In a century we'll be a freak show."

Arundhati frowned. "Your conservative dimes add up to 30 percent of two hundred thousand voters—"

"That's last month. We're 20 percent now, if we're lucky. See, someone pointed out that if you have a municipal incubator with monthly fees, poor people might not manage repeated installments of two hundred cash, so conservative nightmares about multiplying welfare hordes vanish into thin air. Meanwhile large families squander large fortunes, so you've got built-in wealth equity! It sounds great, if I didn't doubt the whole premise on technical grounds."

Arundhati sagged forward and rested her chin on fist. "I'm on Mars, talking to a bearded munchkin about the wonders of egg-laying women, chasing after some mad scientist, and worried about alternate universes! When did I stop being real, and turn into a grade-B video?"

"You looked at that file on Bai Shan?" Vlad asked.

Arundhati tapped her tiepatch. "A grade-B villain to make my day complete. I thought I knew Singapore; but this stuff about Bai fighting for the Queen of Heaven—I haven't the foggiest. Martial arts? *I* knew some tricks in my former body, but I wouldn't take him on in this one. Bai eats Blue. Maybe that means it's my job to eat Blue, too."

Vlad tugged his beard in solemn sympathy. "Blue Gisborne was perverse. He chose pain over happiness, ugliness over beauty. I don't envy you his nightmare adventures."

What could she say to that? Arundhati turned to the window. The farms here were less rich: The trees grew scantier and farther apart in the woodlots. Now and again she saw rows of silver-green shrubs bearing fruit as marked; Y-24, G-108, R-41. None were Blue Gisbornes. Blues were almost contraband, nurtured by fanatics in places more hidden than this was.

Enlightenment hit her: Blue eaters were a conspiracy, a league, a hidden network. To ensure supplies of fruit, they treasured their contacts. If Bai Shan settled anywhere for more than a couple of weeks, the news would ripple out through the fannish underground.

Joining that underground would give her a new identity. Arundhati smiled in relief, no longer Greta Jardac's inert bait. Here was something she could do on her own hustle, beginning at Escalante Station, and continuing south into the old crater country that was their final destination.

-4/16 Braho 13-

A long week later the *Berrieh* sat at her usual mooring as the *Tipsy Witch* rounded into the sheltered *migalik*-waters of Eisenroth Dock. The large ship blocked Yossi's view. It was frustrating, because he was curious to see what reception awaited him after six days of noisy Bai Shan bashing.

Mars didn't exactly have police, not with a genetically groomed population smaller than . . . . well, smaller than places on Earth that were famous for their emptiness. True, there were court bailiffs and security marshals, but that was it.

So it wouldn't be like the videos, hard-bitten detectives hauling him off for questioning. Even so, Yossi found Randolph's recent radio call bizarre. The norm lived in a universe where his evening parties took first place over everything.

"Believe me, you're a major draw!" He'd have someone on the dock for him, because Randolph hoped to whisk Yossi off, no matter that he was being a pest on every emergency frequency in the Southern Hemisphere, talking repeatedly of Hasday Ghazzabi's murder.

Yossi was expected to keep different parts of his life on different shelves, and this Bai Shan business had little to do with Randolph's own fixations: politics and architecture and private entertainment.

So it seemed. Sure enough, only two figures stood at the *Witch*'s slot, with two other watchers parked farther back along the dock. Yossi had a sobering thought. Assassins?

Randolph pulled down his snood and waved reassuringly. Yossi tooted back, and fired his anchors. He began initiating shutdown, perhaps a longer-than-usual shutdown for his dear little ship. That meant he had to be extra thorough. Five minutes passed before he debarked. During that time, a single-axle khod somehow appeared, Randolph at the wheel. "Come on up!" he shouted.

Yossi climbed into the companion seat and they lurched off for Drumlin Avenue. Randolph pulled down the weather bubble. "No one can hear us," he began. "Jesus God, Yossi! All that Bai Shan noise?"

"I got tired of following his script like a nice boy," Yossi answered. "He had me by the balls, three hundred thousand cash worth of balls. Let him sue! If I waited to get back here before reporting the crime, people would wonder if that delay made me part of his scheme."

"I'm trying very hard to keep cool," Randolph admitted, speaking in a tightly controlled voice. "Yossi, what you did is going to make Lester and Bai go deeply to ground. They'll be all the harder to dig out.

"Look, you didn't know, but Greta and I spent *months* contriving a trap for those two. We were subtle as hell! We've got a troop of dimes scouting east with a nice cover story, but those chaps will suspect *any* cover story from now on! And we've got to send security in. It won't seem plausible to ignore the things you said. They'll be suspicious if there isn't a hunt."

"What—what?" Yossi stammered. "So what's wrong with that? How can they stay hid? Okay, and why didn't you tell me any of this before I risked my ship? I sure as hell gave you every chance in the world."

Drumlin Avenue tilted up past Eisenroth Chapterhouse and crested Radio Ridge. Here it branched. Ahead lay the Dimetown Ring, and a scattering of multiplex and light-industrial igloos.

Randolph's towerblock was visible in the distance, skirted by the greenhoused hectares of Bachman's Farms. The norm wheeled to the right. "I'm telling you now. Lester's up to something dangerous. We don't want to press him into taking risks. Back to the wall, finger on the button, that kind of thing. Yossi, I'm sorry Hasday's dead. You don't know how sorry! He was supposed to tell us if there *was* a button. Now our one chance is to get someone on the inside. But you didn't know any of this, and Greta was working behind your back, so we owe you a ton of apologies. Goddammit."

"Goddammit" meant: *it isn't fair to make you the object of my anger, but I'm still angry*. "Lester's not playing with a full deck," Yossi answered, keeping a grip on his own anger. "He's talked himself into these weird ideas about God. I'll tell you the details, but first explain what Greta's up to. Is she in danger?"

The khod picked up speed on the downhill slope. "She's got your last name. That makes her useless," Randolph answered, wrestling the wheel. "In Bai Shan's brain, 'Jardac' glows like blinking neon, thanks to your noise. We've got to depend on a woman named Arundhati. She's our bait, and all for a G10 salary."

Yossi felt protective and in need of protection. He toyed with the idea of joining his sister. Patriot-assassins lived in cities, not in pioneer country. "Greta said I might visit her trading post," he said. "You'd arrange it."

"I don't know what good that would do. Another untrained warm body."

"But useful. I've met Liv Sjoberg and Tubs Najarian. They're two snomos on Lester's team. Bai might tell them he's got nothing to do with any murders, but I could swing them over."

"Apenaŭ praktika," Randolph muttered cryptically, as the khod trundled by Dimetown and started uphill. He spoke on: "Oh, about your money, I can override that performance bond. It's yours to spend. That's the least Greta and I can do to pay back the *zalatwic* we owe you."

A surge of gratitude smothered Yossi's anger, but he persisted. "Send me east. It's the best place I can go. You have a limited attention span, limited resources. How else can I stay in the picture? With bodyguards too, because I'll be with your security team, the ones you don't want to press Lester too hard. I'll make sure we don't. I'll breathe fake fire and always launch off in the wrong direction."

The tower lay dead ahead. Randolph flipped his hood to uncover his bushy black hair. "Maybe that's a good idea. Give me time to think. And tell me more about Lester's God. No, let's make that party talk. Shower and I'll lend you a caftan. We expect forty guests. Some are probably on Lester's side."

"Then my life's worth squat." Yossi lowered his voice as the khod decelerated and stopped. "Bai Shan—"

"Not tonight. The suite has one guarded exit, and there's a columbarium in the building. To kill you is just an elaborate way for the killer to forfeit his own flesh, because he can't get away. And for what? Revenge?"

"Poison's hard to trace."

"Yes," Randolph agreed. "You know I've become an expert at dealing with death-threats? It goes with being a politician of a loathsome type, one who co-operates with UNETAO. *'Mars first and Mars alone,'* as if life here was self-sustaining without help from space! My answer is *Mars first,* yes. But never alone. Once we give way to patriots and kick out UNETAO we'll have dimes versus snomos, dimes versus dimes, Blue fans versus White, Esperantists versus English-speakers . . ."

Randolph trailed off. "Sorry for the diatribe. You pushed one of my buttons, but I'm taking you seriously. Poison, yes. Eat no food close at hand, nothing offered by a stranger. I'll make your drinks." Randolph pushed up the bubble. "What happens to the *Tipsy Witch* if you go east?"

"I'll hire someone from the guild. I'll need employees if the bank and I are going to start a fishing fleet," Yossi answered. "It's time to lay a new keel. Especially if my money's free."

Randolph's face lit up. "That's something else we can talk about tonight." He hopped to the ground. Yossi followed. They hurried into Randolph's building through the loading dock.

The party suite was one floor down. Yossi's hair was still wet from his shower when the first guests arrived and the caterers began the risky business of decanting wine corked in Planet Earth's dense atmosphere. Yossi couldn't afford to develop a taste for the precious stuff. Actually, maybe he could, but he wasn't used to thinking that way. He stuck to the local brew, and retired to the couch with his mug.

People gathered around him, a fair number of women. They admired his courage (or perhaps his narrow comeliness and curly hair, and that bitter twist to his lips), until a dime woman said: "I don't see what's heroic about squawking on the radio after those people were a whole day away."

"I agree with you," Yossi said. "Although Bai threatened to freeze my money, and he made some hints about hired thugs—"

"Shouldn't you be careful about libel?" the dime woman went on unpleasantly. "The Martian economy owes a lot to research labs like Gledhill. We should take care what we say about those chosen to run them. Bragolio has the highest reputation—"

"This is a private party. My guests are free to say what they like," Randolph spoke, closing in on the couch. Yossi's audience shifted to make room for him. "And that sounds like small town thinking. Tell only happy news. Be a booster."

The dime stood. "But this man's making a social career out of blackening other people's names."

"He was just sitting quietly until we pestered him," another woman said. "Has anybody heard from his Bai fellow? Couldn't he radio some denial? It seems strange to keep quiet."

"He might not have a radio. People should wait—"

"Yes indeed," Randolph interrupted. "Anyhow, Yossi's tired of talking about the chap. Let's change the subject. You say you had some conversations with the former director? The old Bragolio, as opposed to the new one?"

"We had the same watch shift," Yossi answered. "So he told me all this stuff about God."

"And about some heresies?"

"Yeah." Yossi took breath. "The universe is sliced through by something called the chaos threshold. Below that threshold, causes have proportional effects. But mostly causes have radically transformational effects, so the flapping of a butterfly's wings in China causes a thunderstorm in Canamexica one week later. The human brain can keep track of Newtonian things like billiard balls, but not even computers can keep track of all those butterflies."

Randolph handed Yossi a drink. He sipped before continuing. "Okay, if the universe were like clockwork, the end state would be reversible. Even if God weren't all that smart, he could resurrect you and me, because what we're dealing with is a universe that works like a memory device.

"But we know the universe isn't like that, so until chaos theory developed, we didn't think of the universe as a memory device. Physicists still don't think of it that way, because the number of bitflips needed to play the universe backward and bring the dead to life is well beyond the cognitive power of this universe, even if it were all one giant computer!"

"So God has to be bigger?" one of the crowd asked. "Wow."

"Yeah," Yossi agreed. "All this is a revival of old ideas about God being transcendent. The universe is his creation, but the resurrection of the dead can't work unless there really is an End Time, when God freezes the picture and applies his calculations. But by itself, this doesn't force us to admit that there *is* a God. Even if the Bible anticipates chaos theory by talking about how the humble can bring down the wise, and how sparrows and mustard seeds are important—"

"You were talking about heresies," Randolph said.

Yossi nodded. "The most seductive is the Asimovian heresy. If you go back a million years and step on some grass, what happens? If you're a Newtonian, there's some residual effect a million years later, but it was unimportant, so the effect isn't important either. And if you're an Asimovian, things get erased over time.

"Suppose Fercho hadn't invented his memory transfer equipment four hundred years ago, or Columbus got the plague instead of finding America. As time passes this gets smoothed out, until a million years from now it makes no difference whatever.

"That sounds plausible, but according to chaos theory it's absolutely wrong. Stepping on the grass has a radical effect within a week, and it *keeps getting more radical*! It ripples out, see? It's all too bad for Lester. He'd be better off if Asimov was right. Then the universe would be a lousy memory device. God would have to shuffle off, because he can't do his job."

A norm had replaced the dime woman who'd been so unfriendly a few minutes before. He screwed up his face. "I don't see how changes could ripple forever. The universe is a closed pond—"

"That's it!" Yossi exclaimed. "Thanks, I forgot something. See, the universe is expanding. Life is getting more complicated. People have developed a moral universe on top of the physical one, so there are always new ways for causes to have their effects, more and more room. But at some point the universe will start contracting, so God would be smart to have his End Times before the squeeze is on.

"But this is precisely what Lester wants to look for, poking his head into some *other* universe. If that universe is shrinking, or frozen into some non-expanding constancy, that's the place for him. No God, see? Well, I don't either, but the guy was a tad unhinged. I had to listen for most of a week. A lot was over my head if it ever made sense in the first place."

"We don't need God anymore," a woman said. "We've got our own resurrection. When these bodies die we can become bugs, or get played into new flesh."

"Yeah, but our ancestors need him," Yossi answered, his voice rough from overuse. "And accidents happen. How many people alive in the 2040's are still around today? But that's not Lester's concern. He doesn't want God, he's just stuck with him, unless he can escape." This said, Yossi swallowed the rest of his drink. "I've talked myself dry."

Some of his audience took this as a release. After a minute, Yossi wandered off, grazing for food. Randolph came up and patted his shoulder. "Thank you."

"What did I do?"

"That dime woman? We're running a check. Emma Schalk's with customs. She was up in Fournier LTO back at the turn of the month, when that attempt was made on Morse's life. Now we've got someone to watch."

"Another unintentional favor," Yossi muttered. Here was a new chance to lobby Randolph. "See how lucky I am when I'm around? And what a disaster when I'm off on my own? You've got to send me to Greta, that proves it."

"Yeah." Randolph lowered his voice. "Okay, can you make tomorrow's day train to Fournier? Deliver your petition to the judge, swear your oaths, and I'll get you ticketed to Escalante Station. It gets complicated after that, but first you need to pack and hire your replacement. There's papers to sign if you want me to stand proxy, and other stuff if you want to borrow bank money for your second ship."

"Get all that together. I'll sign in the morning. Right now I'd better bounce off to the Chapterhouse," Yossi responded. "This is late for me. Uh, what about a bodyguard?"

"Have Sven come with you. Big guy at the door with a blond goatee. Good luck."

"Same to you," Yossi answered.

-4/16 Braho 15-

Sister Su had left her battery case up on the top of the cliff, together with a heap of legs and tools. Stripped down, she was little more than an audio-spectral sensory unit protected by a solar carapace, her more productive (but delicate) wing panels half retracted because of the rough terrain. Torso clamps held her snugly to the cable as she spun down, her two remaining appendages ready to grab whatever she might find.

A rockfall had isolated this part of the old monastery back in the second intercometary, during the peak years of the mummy-cult era. But though they were difficult to get to, these cliff niches could be inspected telescopically, niches crowded with bodies in lotus posture, freeze-dried to a hardness recently becoming brittle. Pictures proved it; pictures of flaking and decomposition. Could anything be done to save these relics of the past?

Some monks and nuns in the upper echelons hailed back to those weird old times, and were genuinely concerned. They wanted samples taken. As usual, Su was in charge of the mission.

"First we'll take DNA samples. Then the lab will hunt for parasitical organisms. Once we rule out bacterial agencies, we'll take a look at temperature stresses . . ." Sister Sue replayed Abbot Gould's words in her mind, words that conceded a monstrous possibility: the thickening of Mars's atmosphere made biological life viable even here, twenty-five kilometers above "sea level"!

It wasn't possible, however nutritious these brittle corpses might seem to a desperate lost microbe. On her last foray down the Olympic plateau, Su the great bug explorer, delver of lava-tubes and ten-times published areologist, had found only moribund spores above the fifteen kilometer mark. Olympus Mons was a bug reservation by treaty, but mostly because wetlife had no use for it: they came as tourists, or to die.

Or they sent up their souls, by the thousands. The new monastery was crowded with bugs who acted like Olympus was retirement heaven. They basked and played games, or imagineered themselves into c-space drama fantasies. Only a rare few remained restless, and took on new ambitions.

Su enlisted her team from among that number. But this particular mission was hardly a team job—just fill a few containers with corpse dust. And do it before the sun began to set. Without her battery pack, Su had no margin of time before low-power shutdown. Once her source of light was gone she'd hang dead on this cable all night, and lose face in front of everyone.

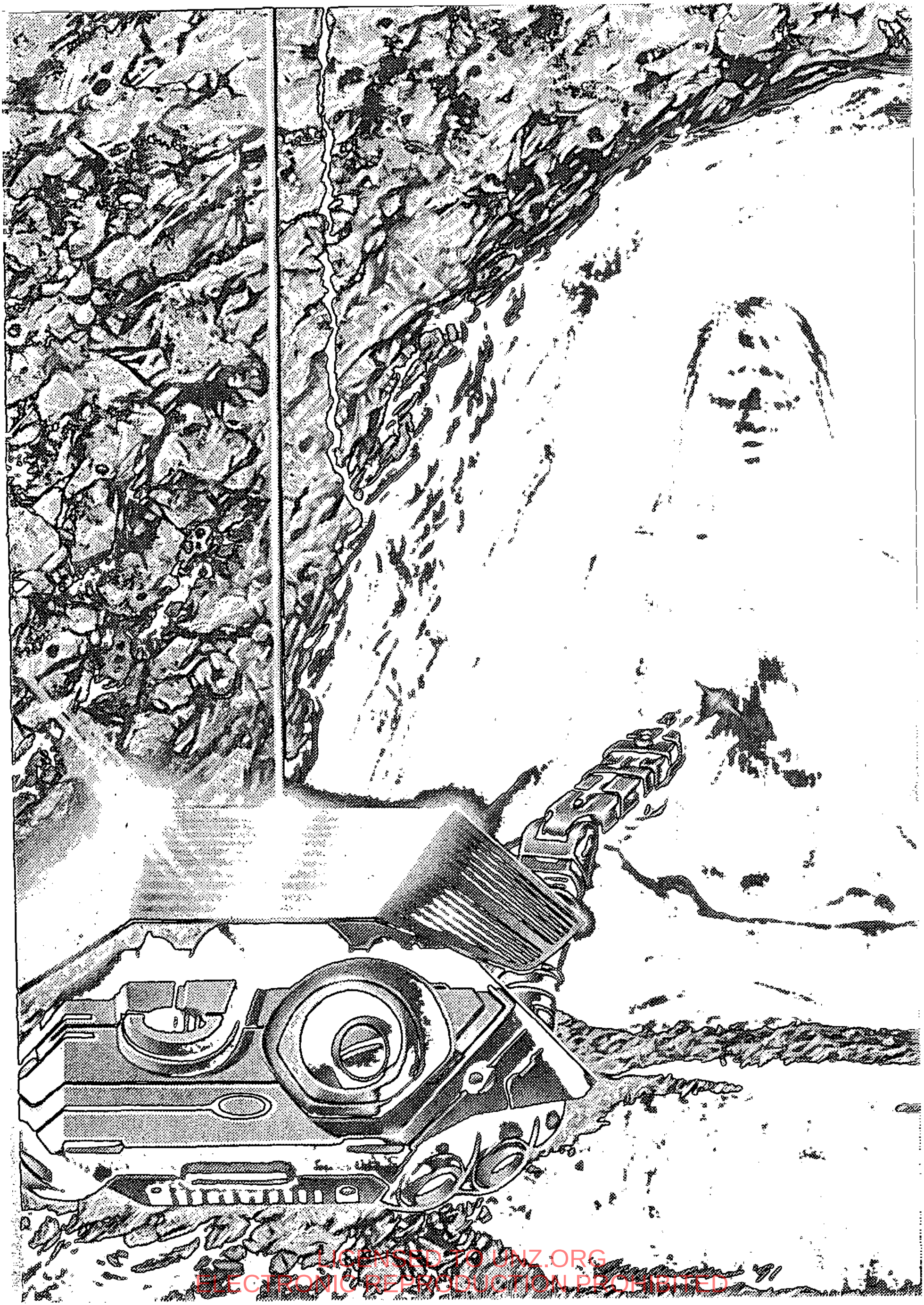
It mustn't happen. Shadows meant danger, and Su tracked their lengths carefully. She descended three hundred meters down the cliff face, and positioned to swing in to her first goal. She hooked the niche ledge, reeled close, and unscrewed container number one.

This first mummy was in bad shape; the body of Paidrog O'Somebody-or-other, an emigrant to some distant comet who could hardly mind if his corpse was sampled in a worthy cause. Su was pleased, because Paidrog was a worst-case monstrosity. Now for someone who'd weathered time a little better.

She slid down her tether another forty meters to another niche and another clump of bodies. Lurlene Talboy, an early convert to Mahayana Buddhism, had walked this far back when there was a ledge to walk on, sat down stark naked, and forced herself to look serene before death came; a matter of thirty seconds of gassy agony. Her courage contributed to the starting up of the mummy cult, yet old as it was, her body was tough as rawhide. Su extruded a scalpel to slice off a bit of Lurlene's inner thigh.

Shit. None of the legends had said she'd gooped herself with—Lucite? Lacquer? Stripped down as she was, Su had no way to perform chemical analyses.

As she sawed, a radio voice interrupted her thoughts: *Su, this is Monsignor Kirschwasser; Diplomatic Office. Switch to encryption routine four*



one six. Something's come up, a job for your whole team. Can you muster them in six hours?"

Su coded her answer and spoke slowly to give the encryption routine time to transmit a haystack of noise for every needle of real content. "Eighteen hours minimum. Some of my gang are pretty far down into Piccolo Crack. Why the rush?"

"I can't say until we're cabled for ultra-privacy. Your team are going to need training in new modules. Training in deep-atmosphere operations. Laserlaunch training. Days *of preparation! How many have scruples against killing wetbrains in a desperate cause? Eliminate those from your count."*

"It's still going to take eighteen hours." Su looked at the lowering sun, and was careful not to transmit her frustration. "I'll come straight up. See you as soon as I get there."

The Diplomatic Office was a bunker sprouted with antennae, roofing over a collapsed lava tube some distance back from the caldera cliffs. As soon as Su put herself together again, legs, tools and batteries, she rode the slideway across the three-klom distance and plugged into one of Kirschwasser's I/O ports—like any bug bigwig, the poor guy was too networked to move, too multi-slotted and commlinked. He was a traffic cop in a jam of data.

As soon as the connect was verified, the monsignor spoke without pleasantries or introductions. "A shockley named Lester Bragolio appears to be a participant in some criminal scheme. We've overheard transmissions from someone named Yossi Jardac on one of the human emergency bands, accusing him indirectly of murder. The affect rating is high; the fellow's sincere. This is the second such accusation connected with Lester's loss of office. He's been kicked out of Gledhill Labs, and since then he's clearly avoided custody. Thanks to this second death he has escaped norm scrutiny. Implications?"

Su ran a probability check. "He was involved in something the norms didn't like, and he means to persist." At sixty-two true to thirty-three false, her statement was better than a guess.

"We've looked further into the situation," Kirschwasser went on. "He was working with transdegenerate states of matter-energy."

Looked into the situation, huh? Bugs masquerading as fictoids, as gadgetry, as reefer boxes and AV consoles, were scattered all over Mars, perfect spies who never had to eat or sleep or pee: spies who thought nothing of ten-year stints of service. Of course there'd be one at Gledhill, handicapped by his or her disguise, but somehow able to get the word out.

Su's thoughts raced ahead. A second spy was involved too, or why this sudden urgency? "We know where he is, and you want my team to . . ."

"To assist the norms in their inquiries," Kirschwasser said. The message stream included no tone of voice, just a string of letters and punctuation, but Su understood that the monsignor was being facetious. "Legally speaking, it's none of our business," he continued, "but if we strike before Lester advances his work . . . You know what string is, don't you?"

"It had to do with the early universe. With the formation of galactic clusters?" Su guessed.

"Those clusters are the largest irregularities in the cosmic pattern," Kirschwasser answered. "The stuff that made them is nothing to mess with. The whole technology has to be forgotten; quickly and absolutely. The possibilities in Lester's head have to be suppressed. He's got to die. I want your team to make sure he does."

"At what personal risks?" Su said. "We might be arrested; even wiped or pulsed."

"Sometimes heroes have to be villains," Kirschwasser answered. "And sometimes even villains have to make a supreme sacrifice. All Olympus is behind you. We'll remember you in our prayers, and restore your backup souls if any of you should die during your mission."

Sister Su thought many thoughts during the next few milliseconds, a gap that meant EOI: transmission over. She unplugged herself, indulged in shock at the idea of killing a wetbrain, and ran through her options.

Kirschwasser was right. There was nothing else to do. The safety of Mars was paramount, so Lester was doomed. She went through her database, and began radioing out a series of priority-A summonses.

-4/16 Braho 16-

Escalante Station began as a terminal, a yard, and a row of warehouses. In time the front offices became shops. The recently built hotel had outward-facing windows. It was an unusual design, but the land was green with the help of windmills and irrigation canals. Visitors from north and south liked looking at all the foliage.

Those visitors had rowdy ideas of entertainment. The good folk of Escalante attempted to thwart them.

Clashes got tiresome. Accommodations were made. The hotel was posted off limits to snomos and other wild types, who got leave to camp in the municipal park. The citizens of Escalante bought land for a second park, turned a blind eye to the first, and everyone was—well, not happy, but business jogged along.

Sophisticated tourists from Fournier were rare, but valued. They rode in on the train, took rooms in the hotel, sniffed at the shops, then vanished into the vice-ridden stews of Snomo Park.

The park began to boast permanent residents. They elected their own mayor. Fabric walls gave way to sheet metal, and in time to foamstone. The decent dimes, norms, and tubers of Escalante voted to plow the place under. They mustered three hundred souls and some heavy equipment. Thirty or forty snomos scrambled off during the assault. They returned for revenge some hours later, the teamsters driving two- and three-axle khods.

The hotel was designed to survive into the fifth intercometary, dust and marsquakes be damned. Much of it still stood the next morning. The warehouses were so many shambles. A day later, norm marshals arrived from Fournier. Six snomos were tried and convicted. Escalante Station began to rebuild.

Sophisticated tourists now lodged in patched hotel rooms. They were told that no Snomo Park existed, nor ever would again.

Arundhati didn't mean to prove anyone wrong: she just asked the fruit man at Lafferty Farms if he had anything " 'special.'—You know what I mean?"

The dime scratched his bald head. "What *do* you mean?"

"Blues. Low numbers, anything earlier than B-50. I mean, I'm not a—"

"We don't carry Blue fruit." The bald dime wrestled with his conscience, and then continued. "You might try at that new snomo camp. They sell wild fruit. But you gotta watch out. I wouldn't go there alone."

"Where is it?" Arundhati asked.

"Take a right where the old park was and go maybe three kloms, keeping the ditch to your side. You'll see it. They're going to incorporate and have their own town. I suppose that's how it should be, except three kloms isn't far enough."

Arundhati returned to the hotel. She collared Greta. "You people have to go, but if I'm to enter the Blue world this is the place to start. I don't see how I can pass as a novice fan unless I've eaten a dozen low numbers. Then maybe someone will take my schooling in hand, but that'll work better if I'm not closely tied to you."

Greta pondered. "I want to give you a wad of cash. Will you need a weapon?"

"No." Arundhati shook her head emphatically. "After a bit I'll ride south at whatever pace seems natural. I'll recognize any messages you send through my tiepatch as, uh, Bozo the Clown. I don't have the gear to patch you back, but I'll respond as fast as I can."

Greta gripped Arundhati's shoulders and gazed sadly into her eyes. "I've got news from Randolph. Remember I told you my brother screwed us up last week with all his Bai Shan noise? Damn it, I'm proud he put justice above cash, even if it makes our work harder, but the word is, Yossi's coming out to join us. He's getting his own squad of marshals to hunt down the bad guys. I'm only glad he won't know you—"

"—Because he's such a lousy liar," Arundhati finished. "Life gets interesting. If I turn into a damsel in distress, your sterling brother might be the only one around to rescue me. Is he handsome, by any chance?"

"Not bad." But Greta couldn't be jollied. "Your soul's on file back at Fournier," she said. "If anything goes wrong, I promise you won't stay permanently dead."

Arundhati smiled. "Thanks for the sentiment. Thanks for daring to say the 'd'-word. This is one of those damnfool worthy causes—oh, let's just hug goodbye, before this gets too meaningful for me."

Ten minutes later, Greta and her dimes were out the door, loading onto a khod. The vehicle lurched forward on its giant tires. Arundhati waved, put on her coat and snood, and began her own hike, muttering maledictions at Lisbet Hume when her overlarge legs started to chafe. Lisbet-the-pathological-liar turned out not to be a natural blonde after all. Arundhati's roots were coming in dark, an appropriate transformation. She'd be more her own person as a brunette with a short cut. And someday, maybe, a *svelta* brunette!

There was Blue fruit at the snomo camp. Arundhati found a tuber who wasn't too diverted to sell her a couple. The letters of his *Quacksalver Dreams* sign were penciled and awaiting paint: he laid down his brush after finishing the curlicued "k" to take her cash.

"I wonder if I should eat these here," Arundhati said, looking around at flapping fabric, tight guy-ropes, and the occasional heap of rubble. She wasn't ready to face the hike back to Escalante.

"Sure," the tuber winked. "Use my tent. Jono Quacksalver at your service." The name sounded made up. Perhaps it was typical of fans to do that.

"Arundhati. That's all I call myself, just the one name." With a nervous smile, she crawled in, looked at her booty, and took a bite.

Minutes later, Arundhati woke to her own reality with vast relief. She was alive! No, they hadn't eaten her, the cannibals in that huge room, hungry, yet so reverent—gawking as if she were a god!

She shuddered. Where had Gisborne gotten this ugly vision, this nightmare overpopulated Earth? Had it been like that once?

The impact wouldn't be so powerful if the protagonist hadn't been *her*. How could that happen?

And did she dare eat this second fruit? No, not yet. Arundhati looked at herself. When she'd first seen this body, the hour she'd landed on Mars, it had seemed pretty. Overweight, yes, but pretty first. Gisborne's eyes saw her differently. Her healthy pink became a dead gray, flushed at times by hectic color. She'd grown saggy and deformed. Why would *anyone* want to go back to that by eating another Blue?

Blue fans must have a great need to punish themselves, Arundhati decided. *It all has to do with traffic in pain. Sadism, and masochism.*

Wiping his paintbrush, Jono Quacksalver peered back at her from outside the tent. "Ah, you've finished. That's one of the early ones. I'm not a compulsive librarian, but I like to eat fruit in chronological order. If you're new to Gisborne there's no other way. Something like B-94 would have you running off to join a convent!"

"And this other one?" Arundhati asked.

"Some history in that. Genetic research in South Africa. The place where concentration laagers were invented in the Boer wars, and this is a couple lifetimes later. Watch out, or the kaffirs will get you! They're your victims, your lab animals. Imagine how they hate you!"

Arundhati shuddered. "Aren't there any—easier—adventures?"

The tuber grinned. "That's Blue Gisborne! If you want easy, eat White and be a barbie doll."

"That would be the cruelest ordeal; to be plastic-perfect in a perfect world, and then see it start crumbling away."

Jono nodded at Arundhati's insight. "If you can think it, Gisborne's done it. Too bad I can't offer a full library, but once this new Snomo Park gets built up, I'll have hundreds of fruit to choose from."

"And all grown around here. Far enough from Fournier so nobody notices, but somewhere fertile."

"That's where you're wrong! Fruit bushes are tough. They grow anywhere." The man picked at his face. "You want to know where I get my supplies? I could tell you. Yes, I could tell you."

"Really?" *Name your price!*

"I'd like to . . . take care of you," Jono said. His look of cunning dropped away and he began to blush. "I'd be your servant, see? You have a queenly look; not cold enough about the eyes, but you could be demanding. I'd—I'd feed you, and dress you, and fetch pretty things . . ."

"I expect obedience." Arundhati shifted, trying for a dominatrix pose. "There aren't many Blue women," she guessed, hoping she was playing this right. "I can be choosy. Only the best at treating me right are allowed to serve me. But I'll teach you, and you'll learn. And don't think I won't punish you if I'm not satisfied!"

The joy that transformed Jono Quacksalver's face was almost terrifying. "What first?" he asked.

Certainly nothing expensive, Arundhati thought, considering how marginal Jono's business was. The man was an enterprising transient, nothing more. "Some ointment for my legs. Then a foot-rub. Then maybe a nice snack." *I have a gift for this,* Arundhati decided. *I can rattle off task after task. Poor Jono! What are we getting into here?*

She'd bring him to the hotel, she decided. Perhaps he'd enjoy the dependency of spending her cash, not his. For a couple of days they'd live with one foot in Escalante, and she'd make him talk about Blue fandom. Who were the great librarians, and all that. Then . . . who could say?

-4/16 Braho 19-

Yossi was the complainant, and the judge had sworn four marshals over to him. It was with a mix of legal deferral and professional conceit that they left the train at Escalante Station and suggested a meeting in the hotel bar with the local station-mistress.

"If you're looking for low-lifers, they're well gone, three kloms up the road," she informed the party. Not supposing them to know any manners, she poured her own sake and took a quick sip. "A tuber? And ethnic Han Chinese. Ah, yes, his picture. No, can't say I've seen Bai Shan, and certainly not any shockleys."

"No," Yossi agreed. "They're two thousand kloms so—"

Marshall Mendieta cut him off. "We want to stick up posters: 'Wanted for Questioning.' Don't expect them yet, but maybe these next months." He rose and touched his hood, a signal for the others to follow him outside.

That afternoon the marshals spread through the settlement, putting the locals on warning. Mendieta and Yossi hiked to Snomo Park and made inquiries. Snomos of various ancestries, none Arabic, seemed unconcerned about the murder of a norm named Hasday Ghazzabi. "You must be in tiepatch contact with people farther south," Mendieta said to Greg Begay, who was dark enough under white fur, but Navajo. "They might have noticed newcomers."

"Yeah. Blues jamming around that big library, the one Colonel Plotwitt built out of the wreck of the *Carthoris,*" Begay answered. "We had some fans until a day ago; they decided to head that way. Woman hired a teamster. You'd need your own khod to follow 'em. I can give you names of good drivers."

Yossi shook his head. "No, we're not interested in Blues." It was the obvious thing to say, because the truth was just the opposite. He imagined a spy satellite trying to make sense of scores of converging khod-tracks. A Blue jamboree was perfect cover for Lester Bragolio's work, assuming this library-place was big enough. Being Blue, Bai could serve as a patron. But if that was true, Yossi'd have to steer his marshals away from there.

He tiepatched into a map. "How about, uh, Arrhenius Crater? Or Müller?"

"New lady coming into Arrhenius. A bit classy for a trader's apron if you ask me. She'll be pulling in about now, and she's got a bunch of dimes with her."

Begay smiled as he spoke. Yossi felt a familiar rapport: The snomo was *too* well-brought up to call *them idiots or fools*, his smile said. But they hadn't a hope of building a Dimetown in crater country.

"Sounds like it's getting crowded down there," Mendieta joked.

Begay shrugged. He picked up some tongs. "You guys want mutton? I got meat on my hotbox. Three cash for a sandwich."

Yossi managed to choke out "no." "I've never seen cooked—mammal—before. Lord bloody haysause, please don't wave it. We'd better go, but if you hear anything . . ."

They hurried off, leaving these words adrift, hearing the snomo chuckle behind them.

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Arundhati lay on the sleeperette behind the snomo teamster. As his khod jounced southward on its giant wheels, she decided that life was cruel.

This insight struck her after her seventh fruit. Life was cruel. Certainly Jono Quacksalver was cruel to pamper her, trying to feed her beyond mere lazy plumpness. Seen with Gisborne's hard eyes, her body was swollen and pale as a toadstool. She was a slug, and she deserved rape and drowning, and confinement in a solitary cell. . . .

This last time, religious zealots performed the female counterpart of castration. She shrieked her sins, confessing at the top of her voice, but never confessing the right thing, because they never told her what they wanted to hear. Afterward, she demanded something to drink—a *lot* to drink. She barked orders at Jono, humiliating him into servile ecstasy.

What a worm! And increasingly grotesque in appearance, something she hadn't noticed the first day she met him. Of course, back then she hadn't known her own ugliness either. And the snomo had seemed hearty in Escalante Station, rather than fiercely apelike.

At the equator the landscape hadn't been so dead and monotonous, but now it was just boulders and low hills and random fruit bushes. With distance Mars grew colder; white at night, shadow frost shrinking by day. You could get stranded and never found, your freeze-dried body lying behind a rock while rescuers hunted meters away. The sun shone too small in a too dark sky, and the khod threw up choking clouds of dust.

One thousand, eight hundred kloms of hell. Four days to Arrhenius Trading Post, assuming no accidents. Then another three hundred kloms off at an angle to Plotwitt's Library, a habitat scavenged out of the ruins of a wrecked spaceship. It was going to be one hell of a Blue jamboree, true though it was that Jono hadn't exactly been invited.

Come to think, hadn't it been four days? Arundhati's heart fluttered . . . but no. No devious Gisborne-plots, bad guys whisking her off to do evil things. She'd just lost track. Easy, with all that fruit, and too much drinking in between. "How much longer?" she asked. "Jono, find out—"

"Six hours," the snomo answered. He didn't like her. Arundhati didn't blame him. The way she treated Jono was a crime.

She tapped her tiepatch, and figured their position on a map. A hundred fifty kloms from Greta. She'd know by the look in Greta's eyes if she was ugly, or if the way she saw herself was just the effect of too many Blues.

Was there an antidote? She asked herself that question more often than any other. More often than: *How will I recognize what Lester Bragolio is up to? How will I decide if it's safe to stop him?*

The red ring around Arrhenius showed that she was close to tiepatch transmission range, a distance limited by the strength of her unboosted battery. The lack of a keyboard made the job time-consuming: tapping up the labials and then skipping *p* and *ph* to get *b*, then tapping ENTER. *O* was the fourth entry in the vowel menu, and *z* . . .

Arundhati had no idea whether *z* was a palatal, cerebral or dental. She took ten minutes to compose "Bozo the Clown." Tiepatches weren't meant for this sort of thing. "C you 2nite in the privy" seemed an appropriate message, a bit jokey. "Beds?" She hit SEND, and kept the screen up so she could SEND again every twenty minutes.

Except for that, she drowsed like a bored cat. A message came back: "Lots of room. Tots gone."

Arrhenius Trading Post was in the center of a low crater a hundred thirty kloms across, so there weren't even any ridge-walls to look at, just desert, with bushes now and again.

The bushes grew thicker. Trails converged, tires, hooves and feet, and there they were. Arundhati was last to get out of the khod. She looked forward to these next minutes with eager dread. "Jono, I have to talk to Greta privately. I don't want you hanging near me." She gave him a pat on the head, poor recompense, but it was much too late to be fair to him, and she couldn't stretch to be queen to one person and employee to another, both at the same time.

Greta was obliging. Arundhati dove through the store part of the igloo, dragging the norm back into the kitchen. She pulled down her snood. "Do you have Blue seeds? There's got to be an inventory, right? I need an excuse to wangle my way into Plotwitt's Library. It's what a fire-breathing clerk might do. It's in character," she added pleadingly.

"Plotwitt's. That's, uh . . ." Greta turned to a map on the keeper door, marked with names and riddled with pinholes.

"It's the *Carthoris*. There's a Blue gathering taking place now. It's perfect cover for Lester and Bai. They could have arranged it. That's what smart people do with months to plan. They set up covers, like you with your dime gang. Where are they, by the way?"

Greta tapped places in sequence along the map, running west to the coast of the Throxus. "They'll cut south short of the shore and then come back, a triangular trip."

"Good. They're out of the way. When Yossi comes, he can follow them, like he's worried about their innocent safety."

"He's a day behind you," Greta said. "Thirty-some hours at most. Why don't I keep him until you've gotten there? If Lester's at home, patch me a message. Something innocuous, like '*Send more fruit.*' ".

Arundhati nodded. "I'll do that. Just give me a signal booster. And if it's time to raid, I'll say '*Top prices for Blue here.*' " She began to peel off her outdoor suit, while Greta peeked from the kitchen into the store. "Who's the tuber?"

"Jono Quacksalver. I'm his domina, and I'm tired as hell of giving orders and playing the bitch." Arundhati's eyes welled up. "I was a norm and norms are angels. Now I've fallen out of heaven. I've plunged as far as you can fall, rolling around in Gisborne's psychotic shit, and maybe it shows."

Greta shook her head. "You're tired. We'll do some laundry for you tonight, and you'll be better in the morning. I'll get Jono a separate bedroom. Is that okay?"

"Wonderful." *Except it's only my head that's exhausted. My body hasn't had anything to do for four days!*

She fell asleep anyhow. She woke to breakfast, her clothes neatly folded by her bag. An hour later, she was back in the khod, ready for another day of hell on the road.

It took three hours to reach the crater wall, three hours in which Jono fed her B-41. She was a mother, illegally pregnant with her second child.

What did she know of this society's laws? Caught, imprisoned—how *could* she know that by saying no to abortion, she'd condemned her first daughter to death?

The khod crawled up the slope, and over. Nine more hours to go. At this distance her tiepatch barely caught Greta's message: "*Keystone Kops just in range.*" She had a booster behind her travel pack. She could plug it in. She might send a word to Yossi, this lifelong tuber who might have frizzy red-gold hair like his sister. He was a victim, like her. Not a victim of Lester, Bai, Randolph, or Greta; but a victim of the mission.

How would he be used? Was he thinking of her? Did he know that she existed? He'd find out soon, and *what was this anyway?* She was practically mooning over the guy! He was probably short, with a beer belly and bad teeth. He'd smell of fish, and have the wrong politics.

She didn't even have his picture in her tiepatch database. That showed how much of an amateur she was. An amateur on an amateur's planet, where spy satellites couldn't track ships or khods if their crews took a few precautions. Were things done more expertly on Earth? Or was that just video?

Compared to the video shows she'd grown up with back in Winnipeg, the Blue world was shot through with righteousness. It was Purgatory and punishment. Life walked a thin crust over a yawning pit, and there was nothing to laugh about.

Nothing to see, either. Rocks and rubble, low hills, bushes, frost in the shadows. A star dropped out of the sky. Maybe it was time to eat another fruit.

The sight was eerie. A roller-coaster lay half-buried in a sandstorm, fretworked girders ribboning above a long dune. That's what the *Carthoris* looked like, the ruddy color dimming with sunset. At 10x magnification, Arundhati saw that the interstices were glazed to create rows of glittery greenhouse rooms. Bushes grew inside. Lights dangled, brightening as the winds gusted and the high propellers whirled.

Colonel Plotwitt must have a good deal of money. As yet Arundhati knew nothing about him. Was he still alive? Jono wasn't sure. He might be a figment behind which Lester and Bai operated, but she couldn't ask her slave that without giving herself away.

Khods sat out in front, at the foot of the dune. So did a shuttle. Wow. Maybe fans flew down from the moons. Or from as far away as Earth!

What a low-budget thing a local fan like her was, compared with such interplanetary glamour! What was she thinking of, to come bearing these handfuls of seeds as the price of admission! Arundhati's fears grew as they wheeled closer.

Another shooting star.

The khod drew up, and the snomo began damping the engine, rod by rod. Jono popped the weather bubble. He helped Arundhati down. "*Ne zorgu* about anything," he told her in an urgent voice. "I'll take care of you. Anything you want, think of me first." He took her bags and hurried around her to lead the way.

The skies were clear, but falling temperatures precipitated the usual dusk snow-out-of-nowhere, drifting down onto the equally sudden hoarfrost. The two unannounced guests left red bootprints that crystallized into whiteness as they approached the library, a thin white that would melt minutes after sunrise.

A many-headed hologram dog guarded a door framed by an arch with a human skull surmounting it, bones paired symmetrically down either side. It led to a *tossut*-airlock. Here a pasty-faced man in a Cardinal's cassock and biretta hauled himself to his feet. Reeling close, he whispered a few guarded questions while his fever-bright eyes fawned over Arundhati's lush figure. "You say you have seeds to sell?"

"We've heard of the library, of course," Arundhati answered, keeping her voice low. "So I thought we might make some swaps. Mine are wild seeds, brought in by snomos to the Arrhenius Trading Post. They could be wonderful—"

"Or useless as a fart at a funeral. Blue seeds sold to non-connoisseurs usually are."

The Cardinal's words took Arundhati aback. "Still, we haven't always seen that many fans hereabouts," she answered. "Will the Colonel—?"

"Oh, he'll see you, if you wait a day or two. If you've got cash for the fee we can squeeze you in." The Cardinal plucked a pillbox out of a pocket hidden among his skirts. He opened it and crunched a small capsule. "Would you like one?" His smile said *I dare you*!

"No. Is there—?"

"Registration is one flight up. Don't use the airtube; kids, you know. You'll want to get on the Colonel's catalogue list first thing, and then God forgive me, but when I see the young flesh, those fresh innocent cherubs in their kicking and hammering fists so happy and laughing and angry chasing and grabbing each other with the wind blowing them up like angels . . ."

The Cardinal's voice faded. His eyes went out of focus. Jono took Arundhati's hand. They worked around him, through the inner door. The tube was as described. The airstream supported a tumbling flock of children. They played who-can-get-highest by pulling at each other's arms and legs. The hall was noisy with their shrill laughter.

A violinist stalked by, tall in black tie-and-tails, with oily black hair, instrument in one hand and bow in the other. His name-tag read *H. Fedak*. A blonde dime followed, snake tattoos on her naked arms. Jono followed in Arundhati's shadow as she spiraled up the wrought-metal stairs.

She caught her breath at the top. A bird flew past, maybe a parrot. The place smelled of moult, and certainly of greenery. A tawny woman sat at the registration table, proud of her fine tight body, clad in matched panties and camisole whose violet color clashed with her orange skin. She laughed at a portly dime in a yellow shawl, and grabbed his fez to balance it on her own head. "Name?"

"We're not on your list, but the Cardinal let us in because I've got these Blue seeds . . ."

Arundhati re-explained herself. The woman grew bored. "Just sign, and fill in the blanks," she said. "If you're gonna peddle, talk to Dahud. He's in charge of the dealers' room. Fournier? That's on Mars, or you'd just say Luna, or Earth, or the Stalk."

"It's the capital," Arundhati said, giving this bimbo an areography lesson. But the orange woman wasn't listening: her attention diverted to a man in blue tights, eyemask, and cape. "God, he actually looks *good!*" she muttered.

He was the least grotesque person in their vicinity, with a wide, sardonic mouth and a chest worth studying for his name—yes, Alec St. Gall; nobody important after all, unless . . . hadn't he been in the news back on Earth, however many weeks ago? Something to do with treasury notes, Europol, extradition . . .

What the hell is he doing here? "So where's Dahud?" Arundhati persisted, fumbling for thirty-five cash, ten meters away from a man who dealt in hundreds of millions. The thought was dizzying, and she grew dizzier as she scanned the registration list; Augustine Barthelemon to Mei Yin. Lester Bragolio and Bai Shan would have seemed plain next to Hippolyte Darke and Orlando Peregrinus, but she didn't find either name.

"I told you," the orange woman answered. "Check the dealers' room." She handed Arundhati an illegible receipt and a blank name-tag.

"Come on," Jono said. "We'll find him. Or have fun looking."

The library was macabre. Colonel Plotwitt had a menagerie of live and stuffed animals, plus videos, plus fruit bushes, plus actual hard books. But rather than providing a separate gallery for each, he'd mixed them together. Little cyber-carousels were scattered in with everything else. There was lots of discount furniture to be uncomfortable in.

Arundhati saw trophies and relics. And worse yet: a box labeled "Bones from a meat-feast. 22/16/15/4." Open carnivorism!

But you eat fish, ĉu ne? She declined to argue with herself, and moved on. There was no marble on Mars, so this bust of Chester A. Arthur was either imported at incredible expense, or faked, even to the chip in his ear. She learned the truth when her hand slid through it. Chester's hitherto benign face mimed pain and outrage.

Up ahead a snomo looked through Arundhati like she was invisible, not quite blocking the way with his two-hundred-kilo bulk. A snomo in this indoor heat? But his fur was clipped into patterns, giving him strips of naked skin to sweat through. A lizard rode his shoulder, its jeweled collar linked by a gold chain to the larger one around his neck.

Perhaps he too was "virtual," and she could walk right through him. Arundhati suspected otherwise. She gave snomo a pass, and two other guests, before working up nerve to tap a stranger on the back. "We're looking for a guy named Dahud? Or maybe the Colonel?"

The man turned and looked at her in open shock. What the hell? He was a tuber, oriental . . .

Oops. Arundhati played dumb. "Do I know you? Or is Lisbet Hume a friend of yours? I'm sorry, but I got swapped into her body, so—" She giggled. "I'm talking too much, aren't I?"

"Small world," Bai Shan answered. "Maybe too small. You'd be . . . ?"

"I *used* to be a norm. I don't quite know who I am anymore. Lost my job after my murder. Now I'm learning what life is like for tubers. Like, shitty."

"Have you got your tiepatch?" As he asked this question, Bai opened his coat so Jono could see his holstered gun. "Tell your friend to take a hike. I'd like to talk to you alone. Who do you work for?"

Arundhati turned and ordered Jono off, possibly out of her life. Regrets? Her thoughts wouldn't come into focus: Jono as hero, Jono saving the day. None of these hopes conformed to the reality of poor little Jono Quacksalver. When he was gone she answered. "I'm a clerk now. There's this snomo trading post, and it's a G10 job—"

"—And you don't know about any falling stars. We've seen them all evening. Bugs. Maybe even schneggs. Military bugs. Killers."

"But—but it's not like eating Blue is against the law! Not the last I heard."

Bai smiled. "You're good. Really good. I think I love you. Let's go this way. Too dark?"

He bent close and touched his lips to her cheek. "—No, I didn't think so. This is the Philosophy section. Look here. Plotinus. And here, Wittgenstein. Every system for organizing reality known to humankind fits between those two extremes. Plot-Witt. Understand? And between them, by some coincidence, a freight elevator. Let's take a ride."

"You're scaring me," Arundhati responded.

Bai grinned. "I used to look at that body, and think *what a shame!* If I could only scoop out Lisbet's brains and put someone else inside! Now it's happened. What message are you supposed to send to bring the bugs in? What's the code? The word that means *attack?*"

Arundhati shook her head. "I don't know about any bugs. I saw two meteors on the way here. Honestly, that's all!"

The elevator rose. EnduraGlass wall panels replaced metal and foamstone. The door opened. "Boss?" Bai asked.

Arundhati saw potted bushes, and six samurai guards standing vigil, facing outward in a circle.

Morse's exact twin, Lester Bragolio stepped forward, right through the nearest samurai. "Who is she?" he asked, pointing as if Bai might not know who he was talking about. The shockley's finger shook, from palsy or nerves.

"A spook," Bai said. "She says *boo,* and then all hell breaks loose. Right, dear?"

Arundhati looked right and left, too many windows showing into naked young night. "I wish I knew why you've moved in on me," she improvised, her voice as shaky as Lester's hand. "Do you think I can be threatened? Oh, I get it! You figure I'm Lisbet. She was a liar, but—"

"Contain your impatience, Bai, " Lester interrupted. "An affect scanner will tell us if she's sincere. Young lady, forgive us, but this is a life-and-death situation. Our six monitors are on alert. We're at bay, and we can't afford to be delicate about your civil liberties. Please answer: *Are you working with the forces beyond our perimeter?"*

A vidcam slid close on a ceiling-track. Arundhati looked up. "I—uh, not with bugs."

"A half-truth," one of the virtual samurai droned, his lips out of sync. Bai smiled to say he already knew. The smile dropped from his face when a moniter winked out of sight. Six samurai were now five.

"Bug intruders have penetrated the five-klom perimeter," one of the surviving images spoke.

"Make her tell the truth," Lester ordered, turning to face the still-distant threat. "If drugs are necessary—"

Arundhati gave up. "I'm telling the truth. The bugs are something else. They must have heard about your experiments with ten dimensions. They took their own steps. And of course they were super fast. My norms are only human. They can't keep up."

"So you'd be in on the norm plot?" Lester asked. He hunched his shoulders defensively.

"I was for a while," Arundhati admitted. "Except—I don't see why you'd believe me, but I've eaten a lot of Blue, and it's a crash course in life as a tuber. I've changed these last days. I'm a new person."

She stared after the shockley as he paced across the room, away from her answer. "They used me," she pleaded, raising her voice. "The Martian power structure played games with my life! If Greta knew about this bug attack, then they used me *and* broke their promise to keep me informed. And what's it all about? To keep you from opening new doors. To preserve their lousy status quo!"

"Bravo," Lester said. Another samurai monitor vanished. Light flashed on the horizon. The shockley suppressed a shiver; he was badly frightened. But if Lester wasn't the perfect master of his body, he was in complete control of his brain. "Bai, check the scanner. Is she sincere?"

"She's terrific. She's got our equipment just about fooled," Bai answered. "We should take her tiepatch and hold it safe, and bring her along. Then we can talk to the opposition if we want to. I'm also more than half in love with her."

"How long did your last love affair run?" Lester asked.

"A few days." Bai smiled. "This woman's got the same body, but an improved soul." Bai and Lester had a very unusual employee-boss relationship if they could talk like this. Arundhati found time in her panic to nurse this fleeting thought. She felt all the more unsettled, as if she was floating inside a nightmare.

Lester nodded. "Factor in her weight and let's be off. If not her, someone else may give the signal. Every minute counts. My gear is ready."

They got in the elevator and rode down. "Please understand, young lady," Lester continued. "We anticipated the need for this upcoming launch. Soon we'll be off for the one part of Mars where I can work in peace. Just by landing there, we'll be presumed dead. There's no snoopy neighbors, and a constant cloud cover to fend off the satellites. The problem was, we needed special transport. A super-hopper. Thanks to this Blue jamboree, we've got one."

"The shuttle," Arundhati guessed.

"Brilliant. All we need do is dress, load, and go, without the previous owner complaining. I don't think he'll complain. Do you, Bai?"

"No." Bai's smile wasn't sinister at all. It was the smile of a generous man, not of a killer. If he could murder someone with that smile on his face, it would be the cruelest end of all, as if death counted less than nothing.

Oh, God! Arundhati tried to stifle her terror. Maybe he'd paid for the shuttle, just paid. Maybe they did bodyswapping at Plotwitt's Library, or sold some very, very special fruit.

They reached a basement, metal walls bulging in, old stains on the floor. It was a warren of passages and they took one that brought them to a well-supplied suit-up area. Lester hurried to dress. "I'm a hostage, aren't I?" Arundhati asked. "You think the bugs won't shoot you down with me along, except they don't know me from a hole in the ground. You've made a big mistake."

"Just dress. Don't bother with a wigglesuit. We won't be up there long."

Afterward they pulled some bolts, and a wall collapsed. Sand piled in. Bai led up, crunching out onto a ground-cover of frost. The old debarkation scaffold stood handy, and they climbed up.

Lester and Arundhati settled in the lower passenger cabin. Bai shut the door. "We're locked in. My assistant has luggage to take on before he becomes our pilot," Lester explained. He raised his voice: "Shuttle? How do you feel?"

"*Lots of meteors tonight*," the vessel answered.

"Any try to talk to you? to sway your loyalties?"

"*Yeah. Bai's a thug and you're a crazy megalomaniac.*"

"Words, words." Lester winked at Arundhati. "So who can you believe? Dangerous, *ĉu ne*, for a shuttle to grow confused?"

"*I'm not confused. You're my new boss*," the shuttle answered. "*Those other guys, they say you stuck some bad stuff into my decision protocols. They didn't think it was possible. They say you're a genius.*"

"That's pleasant to hear. I've got pleasant news in return. We're going for a fun ride. This is something you can remember and tell your fellow fictoids. A historic moment."

"*You'll excuse me, sir, but it's my duty to warn you of a point three danger condition. Someone just shot at Bai Shan from extreme range.*"

"Tell him to hurry inside," Lester ordered. "They'll only get more accurate with time. To hell with the luggage."

"*Very good, Doctor Bragolio.*"

Two minutes later the shuttle thundered into the sky.

Yossi bent forward as Greta zoomed the screen in her private quarters, the rooms next in from the trading post kitchen. "Three people, yes. I see them on the shuttle scaffold. Bai, Lester, and who else? Have them drop color. The resolution is better with gray."

"This is almost an hour old. The bugs still haven't found Arundhati," Greta answered anxiously. "Doctor St. Gall says he doesn't know a thing. He traded library for shuttle, and isn't liable for anything before today.

"What a sleaze!" she complained. "You'd have to work to keep as ignorant as he claims to be. They've questioned a Blue fan named Jono Quacksalver. He's the only one who hasn't shut tight as a clam. He says Arundhati went off with Bai. At least the man *sounds* like Bai from Jono's description."

Marshal Mendieta paced a tight circle. "They've got nerve, asking us for help after fouling up everything with their raid!" he said. "They should have guessed Lester had radar. A shuttle, for God's sake! The place is an unlicensed LTO!"

"It appears to be an unlicensed everything," Greta said. "Bodyswapping, drugs . . ."

"And the bugs are going to leave all that nicely in place, and tootle off. We should make them pay. Conscript a few deputies as long as they're on site. Otherwise me and my marshals will have to clean it up by ourselves."

Greta looked at Yossi, her eyes welling with tears. "I sent Arundhati. She came here in mental distress and I sent her anyway. That's her khod in front."

"Are we still on live connect? Ask the bugs where the shuttle's going," Yossi responded.

Greta picked up the mike. "Hello-hello! Arrhenius to Sister Su, can you make out the shuttle's destination? Hit me."

"Copy you, Greta. They do not have orbital velocity. They've peaked out of the atmosphere, and are beginning re-entry. We estimate latitude two six nine, twelve degrees north, but that's suicide. They've got some trick they'll pull once they get under cloud cover."

"Why is it suicide? Hit me."

"It's the middle of Isidis." Sister Su answered. *"The molten sea. We're looking for further engine firing, the sooner the better. If they don't alter course before they hit the cloud deck, it'll take a miracle.*

"On the other hand, Lester seems capable of miracles. Please, can you okay our requisition of at least one khod? Otherwise we have to leave here on foot, eating solar energy. Nobody's cooperating for love or money. These Blue fans resent us dropping in."

"They aren't the only ones! Use the khod Arundhati rode in on. If the driver makes trouble—oh, I don't know. Do it anyhow. Over."

Yossi grabbed the mike out of Greta's hand. "Yossi Jardac here. Meet with me at minus thirty latitude, two forty longitude. Do you copy? We're taking a khod up from Arrhenius. We want to meet you. You're heading for Isidis, aren't you?"

"We've no other choice. It's not like we feel any enthusiasm for the place. Lester's leading us around by the nose."

"That's why we need to meet and talk, without radio waves rippling out everywhere. See, I've got an idea."

Four hundred forty kloms meant eighteen hours on the trail, plus a couple getting started. By trading shifts with their snomo driver, Yossi and Mendieta (separated now from his squad) reached the rendezvous forty minutes ahead of the bugs. Yossi climbed down into afternoon sunlight, and began to dig.

Water welled into his pit. He cupped his hands, and took a drink. Black fruit hung from a nearby bush; Black for Hassan. Hassan had been contagious with God, the first to urge his friends on the quest for the Garden of Eden. Six searchers, six colors, six different souls. Marshal Mendieta went over and harvested a fruit. Black was one of the colors norms would eat.

The bug khod wheeled up. Sister Su clattered down. She beetled close on her six legs. "Yossi Jardac? We spoke earlier."

"And I was obscure. But by now you've probably outpaced me. Am I right?"

"You have a theory about Isidis?" the bug asked hesitantly. "You are correct that fragments of planetary crust are lighter than magma. Even after being shattered, they'd tend to float like—like—"

"Like rafts. Lester and Bai must have sent a scout. They found an island surrounded by lava, and planted a beeper to guide their shuttle. Our ordeal isn't over, because it's obvious they had time to prepare. They might have brought in enough gear to let Lester open his dimensional doors. Besides, there's a hostage named Arundhati."

Sister Su straightened her joints and telescoped high, a meter above the sand. She oriented her solar wings to bask in the sunlight. "We could laserlaunch, but never blindly into a lava sea."

"No need," Yossi answered. "We're going to sail that sea on our own little hunk of crust. We'll start from the west, and build a whopping big sail, and use the prevailing wind.

"We can ride on molten currents. I've seen videos—they flow like lava rivers. Your team can rig a series of bombs. Whenever we need to goose our raft in one direction or the other, you can chuck one over the edge. But let's just us do this. You know norms. Their Planetary Management Committee will slow us down, talking money and politics and safety. It'll be a hassle pushing rock through stuff like molasses, without all that."

Sister Su raised two appendages in a gesture of *what-can-we-do?* "According to treaty, Mars isn't for bugs to play with. Just the top of Olympus Mons. The rest belongs to you wetbrains. We're in enough political trouble from our raid."

"Yeah, but this is my idea. I'm raft pilot, and you can work for me. I'm organic. I'll be the one people fuss at."

Happy Hollow was three kloms by six. Lava had hardened around the edges in sticky layers that built up into ridges, so rainwater had no exit, and pooled inside to make a little lake. Vegetation prospered, a green jungle. Anoxic gasses from the molten sea swirled densely, making it necessary to breathe through airsnoods, like back before the third intercometary. The vapors meant there were no animals, and almost no insects.

The island was hot. Bai shed his clothes and went naked, except for his snood. He planted fruit seeds, but though fruit bushes grew everywhere else on Mars, no matter how high or cold, they didn't sprout here.

Lester stayed in the shack, working. Presumably Arundhati's tiepatch was in with him, because it wasn't on the gutted shuttle.

Arundhati spent her days walking around the island, a course she estimated at twenty kloms. She built up to it over the first week, and ate sparingly, uninspired by the camp's three year supply of TotiNutritional Falofino—"The Powder of 1,001 Uses." Lisbet's fat melted off.

Soon her clothes were too big. She made alterations. Bai followed her with his eyes, seeing more and more of her. When they met, he made it seem like an accident, but accidents were frequent. "You don't appear to be prospering," he complained this latest time.

"You like me buxom and pillowy, but I don't," Arundhati answered.

"I'd somehow expected we'd enjoy this lotus-land more in each other's company," Bai said. "Mists like a Chinese painting. Our own small lake. Trees. Nothing to do. And you to make it perfect."

"You kill people." Arundhati frowned, trying to remember the name Greta told her. "Hasday Ghazzabi."

"Never happened. I gave him a tranquilizer and tumbled him in with some snomos. There's this guy: Yossi Jardac keeps making noise, but it's all coaching. He's told what to say by his norm puppet masters, and they take orders from UNETAO. Collaborators, keeping Mars under a colonial administration."

Arundhati felt off-balance. Bai's view of events didn't reconcile with anything, but his personal universe seemed all too plausible. It was frighteningly easy to believe that UNETAO was evil and employed lackeys and conspirators. Someone was lying, but who?

She persisted: "What about me? You sweet-talked Lisbet Hume into trying to kill Morse Bragolio. She screwed up, and here I am."

Bai shrugged. "Lisbet was her own woman, and not very good at anything."

Arundhati reverted to Hasday. "Why even drug that guy?"

"There's reasons, that's all. I could get used to your new body. The dark hair, too. You're very pretty."

"Why don't you rape me?"

"Do you want me to?" Bai asked.

"No."

"I'm not the villain you think I am," Bai continued. "There are no villains, and maybe no victims either. That's the cosmic irony. God has his place for us all. We're none of us too small for him, because great things come out of tiny planets and tiny sapient species. What Lester's doing is a great thing."

"You can't do great things in a tin shack," Arundhati scoffed. "The age of tinker-physicists is over, and you're a funny one to talk about God."

"Hardly." Bai smiled a twisted smile. "I eat Blue. I travel Gisborne's road, disgrace before salvation. Who among his pals had the best chance of meeting God? Black Hassan? White Joyce? Anybody but Gisborne, right? But Gisborne did it. And I ate that fruit, a fruit so rare a few early seedlings paid for an entire shuttle!"

"You—you—" Arundhati backed away a step.

"God didn't drive me mad. I survived and told Lester. I suspect it added to his motivation, to have me witness the good news."

"God wouldn't bless you or *any* Blue," Arundhati said.

"Don't I make a good prodigal son?" Bai answered. "The lamb that was lost? No, it's not fair. God isn't fair. God's better than fair."

Arundhati shook her head. "It's not real. Chemical cues in fruit, vectored to your brain by nanocytes in your bloodstream. You saw a *representation* of God, the best image ever. But not God himself."

Bai shrugged. "You're right, no matter how I glowed afterward. The real thing would drive me insane, or make me perfect. But—dammit, I'm crying. Whatever you say, I'm happy for Gisborne, because he made it, and if *he* could make it anyone can!"

Arundhati relented and moved close. "I'm sorry. I didn't know you could be like this. I still remember you wearing that gun."

"That's all behind me. I've thrown my gun away. My job is done. When Lester's finished Mars will have something it doesn't need to beg from UNETAO. Freedom will follow." Bai held out his hand and Arundhati took it. "I'm a new man now," he said, "and you're a new woman."

From that day Arundhati hiked rarely. She had other things to do, the fascinations of a man's mind to explore. She thought of Greta less and less often, and of the outside Mars that Greta represented. Merely by chance she circled the island one Wednesday halfway through Ĉerenko. She saw a big square blotch to her west, where she'd never seen a blotch before. She told Bai about it. He went to pound on the door of Lester's shack.

The shockley squinted out into thickening mist. A fresh sheet of rain veiled everything, steaming up when it hit lava. "What do you suppose? Before next morning?" he asked.

Bai sighed. "You don't have to blow everything up. I hate to see that."

"Ah, but I'm crazy, yes? I've gotten their messages for more than a week. We knew the day would come. Let's give them the triumph they're working for, and then UNETAO will fall back asleep."

Bai choked on words he couldn't speak. Then, finally: "I'll take Arundhati. We'll go to the far end. We'll start at midnight."

"They'll arrest you, Bai."

"One man's word against mine," the tuber answered. "I'll face that risk. I can still do some good in this world."

"Yes. The fix I'm in is just big enough for one," Lester answered. "Well, then. Music? Wine? A last party? I was never good at these things. Ceremonies and such."

"Come," Arundhati said. "I'll cook and Bai can open the bottles."

The party lasted late, and Arundhati poured generous cups for both the men. Their conversation grew sodden and philosophical. "Science had its eight hundred years, and who cares anymore? We live surrounded by the luxuries science made possible, on a world science gave us, and now things have come to such a state—"

Lester stopped to sip, and Bai spoke up. "*Human* science is dying. Fettered as it is, sure it's dying. Why spend years in the flesh learning stuff like math? We're just the larval stage, but thanks to science we can live again as bugs when our bodies crap out, and those are the guys who'll take over. They already have."

"Bug research. Good work, but they don't apply it. It doesn't get translated into engineering." Lester hiccupped and went on: "I can explain that too. Science is dying, but engineering is already dead. It's centuries of accumulated software nobody's smart enough to modify. If you earn a degree by learning all that software, the last thing you want to do is explore the dark places where it doesn't work."

They spoke morosely, like Romans toasting the collapse of their empire. The scene was lit by sky-glow from the lowering clouds; red and gold reflections of the lava sea. Gasses breached with explosive force, sending up geysers of flame. It was all very familiar. Why should it end? Why should Lester be pressed to kill himself? Such a senseless death!

Arundhati excused herself as if to visit the bushes, and snuck up to Lester's shack. She crept inside, into a darkness barely relieved by status displays of glowing blue and amber. If only she could find her tiepatch . . .

Outside, the sky darkened with imminent rain. Lightning flashed out the window. In the sudden light she saw what she was looking for. She reached—

"What are you doing?" Bai asked from behind.

Arundhati turned to see him in the doorway. "I'm going to call whoever's coming. I want to tell them to stay away. They don't know they're killing Lester. They won't expect that, and it isn't fair to make them murderers. I like Lester—I know that sounds weird, but I've had training in liking shockleys. The whole situation is just unnecessary!"

"What do you mean?" Bai asked. He stepped in, and took the tiepatch out of her hands. "Why unnecessary?"

"*Lester isn't doing anything here!* He's just wasting time! Can't you see? I was trained to work with his brother Morse, and keep an eye on him. It's obvious to me. This is bells and whistles. Cosmic research in a dippy little shack—maybe it's enough to fool the average tuber, but not someone with a scientific background. I'm sorry, Bai. I wouldn't destroy your illusions for anything less, but a man's life is at stake!"

Bai paled. "Oh God no," He whispered. "You—you—I have to go. I have to do something." He took her by the shoulders. "Can you wait right here? Stay by the shack, it'll only be five minutes. Just stay!"

Arundhati nodded and he plunged off into the night. She stepped outdoors to enjoy the first fat drops of warm rain. She pondered: where was Bai off to? A minute went by, and she decided to follow.

His direction led to the shuttle, a squat shape stained with green. Arundhati saw Bai digging furiously, and held back. Why shouldn't she see this?

He pulled up a bundle, and folded it open, and pulled out his gun. Arundhati's eyes widened. She stepped aside carefully, working away from the path she was on.

She glanced again, to see him loading a clip. And then he started back to the shack.

Oh, Bai! She couldn't run so far that she'd not be able to ask questions from the dark, or witness the deed that would make sense of it all. But yes, a little farther in an unpredictable direction would be wise.

"Arundhati?" Bai called from out of view. "Where'd you go? Where are you?"

"*Why the gun?*" she shouted back.

Bai started for her. She heard him beat into the brush. "Arundhati?"

Her legs sprang into action. Branches lashed her as she fought away from the camp, and down closer to the water. The ground under her feet felt slick and squishy.

bang

She dropped and froze. Lightning split the sky. "You can't know what you said about the Director's work," Bai shouted. "It's not true!"

He waited, as if hoping she'd answer. —*So he can find me from the direction of my voice!* She'd already made that mistake. Arundhati crept on, slowly and carefully. The rain beat down, but not so much here where the bushy cover protected her. She knew when she reached an open gap, because suddenly she was drenched.

"This is tragic, you know?" Bai called. "You're the last person on Mars I'd ever want to kill. And now I have to. I'd like to tell you why, too! Only I can't!"

Why? Arundhati wanted badly to know. How could this man betray her love? Lester was a fake, Lester was a fraud—but why did this knowledge doom her?

"Lester really liked you!" Bai's voice was perilously close. Another lightning bolt showed him standing twenty meters distant, facing away at an angle.

It also showed her, all too clearly. Arundhati rose and scrambled away. Bai turned at the sound, and fired:

bang

She dropped, groaning with despair, half-paralyzed with terror as she heard his footsteps. "If you beg, I might not be able to kill you," he said, his voice catching on the words. "Please beg. Promise me—promise—"

"I won't tell," Arundhati whispered. "Oh God, I'm begging. Whatever you want, I'll do it. Don't kill me!" She rolled over, and clawed up his legs, and bent her head into his knees.

She heard him click the safety. On? Off? She surged up, and tore at him, and fought for her life with every last bit of strength; fought wildly, nothing more than an animal. Bai struggled to contain her.

The world lit up. An explosion breached the night: the noise was unbelievable, a force in itself. Some impact made Bai go feeble, his back to flame and shrapnel. He recovered after a moment, wild as never before. His arms swung in fury, pummeling her to the ground, but now Arundhati had the gun.

Bang. Bang.

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Yossi stared toward the island. "That's not the usual thing, is it?" he asked Sister Su, pointing to the explosion. "It doesn't seem like a magma bolus."

"We're at two sixty-nine and twelve degrees north," the bug answered. "Our target zone. We'll know in the morning. I hoped if that were our prey they'd respond to our signals, but they seem resolved on some other action."

"If it's them." Yossi turned to gaze at the square half-klom of aircraft weave looming behind them. "Stars" shone through the sail after each flash of lightning, bits of sky glinting through holes burnt in the flameproof fiber by weeks of molten shrapnel. Splatter accretions hung heavy on the stays.

Their raft wouldn't serve much longer at this rate. Not all the way across Isidis. But that was all right if they'd reached Lester's island. Yossi felt confident . . . . Yes. Those flames ahead were different. Burning vegetation, sparking red, a galaxy of smothered fires winking out from the lack of oxygen.

So near! Only a klom! Six hours and they'd be there!

Time passed, and the sea became a strait. Lava wrinkled up like the skin of an ancient elephant. Sister Su's bugs hopped across. Yossi waited as a new day dawned, the wrong person in the wrong kind of body, useless in this moment of climax. He paced the bunker, praying to a God he didn't believe in. Ten ghastly minutes went by. Then the bugs made several reports: one woman in a state of shock, minor abrasions, otherwise okay. Bai Shan? Dead.

Lester? Lost in the explosion. The woman agreed: he'd meant to die. The bugs took time to make sure, beetling around in elaborate search patterns, sniffing and probing. Yossi's relief wore off. Death was death, and what goals lay in his future to compare with this one?

He tiepatched their coordinates—his island and hers—to Marshal Mendieta a hundred kloms away. The security hopper dropped on Happy Hollow fifteen minutes later, before plucking him off the *Vulcan*. Yossi found a crash seat and strapped in. He pulled down his snood. "Hi, we haven't met. I'm Yossi Jardac."

She let him shake her hand. "Arundhati," she responded. Moments later the hopper roared off into the turbulent skies, amber with strange gasses, then clear and bright. Home again. No, the magic of Isidis was change and transformation. This was a new Mars, a world made for new people. Things could never be the same.

First they rode the hopper, then both the hopper and its passengers took a short khod ride. Arundhati napped: she was oblivious to Yossi's curiosity and felt no pressure to talk about her last seven weeks. Later that day the westbound MarsBelt train stopped at their summons, not without a great deal of complaint. Emergency? *What* emergency? "If it's true, we'll send a special train."

"But you've got room on *this* one!" They proved that, finding the first floor of the lead car practically empty, with several open compartments. Su's bugs took up sentry posts, discouraging passengers up in the gondola from coming downstairs. Marshal Mendieta went to argue with the conductor, and the engine began to move.

Twenty minutes after he left, Arundhati jerked into life. "Oh!" She reached into her wardrobe bundle, pawed through it in agitation, and pulled out a cassette.

"Hasday's soul," she said, flopping back in relief. "I found it on the shuttle. Bai must have left it there so it would survive the blast."

Yossi passed it to Sister Su. "So he's that much less a murderer. They must have recorded Hasday back at Gledhill, knowing what they were going to do." He looked at Arundhati curiously.

She stared back. "Hug me," she said. "I need a human touch. I've lost everything. Just don't talk. I don't want to hear about evils and threats. I want to be rich, and eat happytime White, and lose my mind." At Yossi's embrace she broke down and started to cry.

Su made a tentative gesture. "You're going to meet people at Fournier," she warned. "They'll take you off and ask a lot of questions. Then there's the press, because your rescue is big news, lady. They'll be waiting for their turn. Are you ready for that?"

Arundhati stiffened. She looked at Yossi in panic. "You've got to help me. Can we dodge them all? Can we get on the train to Hellas Bay?"

"Why?" Yossi asked.

Arundhati stared forward into Su's eye-lens. "Bai Shan deserved his death. He was scum, with a good line of patter. I thought I knew him, but last night erased everything. Except sometimes I wonder if he was a martyr, and what does that make me?"

She turned back to Yossi. "I can't stop going in circles, but whether he was good or bad, he died for a cause. It's up to us whether he died in vain."

"But he did. He died before their job was done," Yossi said, trying to be gentle. "That was the point of everything we . . . Su? There wasn't anything on that island. And nothing back at Plotwitt's Library."

Sister Su made no answer. Yossi grunted as an idea struck home. "Back when Morse landed and you were murdered, there was a gap, right?"

"About an hour," Arundhati agreed. "Until the second shuttle came in, my old boss was on his own."

Again Yossi looked at Su, but the bug gave no clue to her thinking. "Okay," he went on. "For an hour your shockley didn't have a keeper, and it only takes twenty minutes to transfer a soul."

"Lester's soul," Arundhati agreed. "I had all last night to figure it out. While *one* Lester was hopping around Mars pretending to be a big threat, the *other* settled in at Gledhill to continue his work in Morse's body without any norm supervision."

Arundhati sighed, and went on. "Bai meant to surrender today. UNE-TAO was supposed to go to sleep after the blowup—only I'd never keep my big mouth shut. Bai had to kill me after I told him Lester's work was a charade. Same reason he killed Hasday. Hasday couldn't be fooled, and some truths mustn't go public."

"Except you killed Bai instead," Yossi said. "—In pure self-defense." Arundhati shuddered in his embrace. He clutched her all the more tightly.

"Bai was stalling for time," Sister Su elaborated. "He couldn't know if the Gledhill work was done. Everything was forfeit if you broadcast the truth an hour too early."

"Yes," Arundhati whispered. "He had to buy time, an unknown amount of time, or there'd be no miracle. A good miracle, or a bad one? The norms will say *no miracle at all*. I don't think they deserve to judge that. I think I do. And you, Yossi—you deserve a voice. I want you to help me."

"—Against the wise protectors of my world. My sister and my friend," Yossi answered. *You can't trust a tuber,* he should have told them years ago. He paused to contemplate doom, then spoke again, not willing to add to the miseries of this woman in his arms. "If we can get to the *Tipsy Witch*, we're home free. It's everything between that'll be hard." Again he frowned. "Trains have emergency suits, don't they?"

"Electric blue-green," Su said. "She'd stand out. You too. Are you thinking of jumping the train short of Fournier?"

"A klom or two out," Yossi answered, wondering where Su stood in all this. "It'll be night. Warm equatorial night, zero at the coldest. We'll hike, then wait for the train to Hellas, heading into a much colder zone, with no idea whether we can hop on or not. Often there's one passenger car, but sometimes not even that. Somebody talk me out of this. Please Su, is this crazy?"

"Is foamstone warm when it comes out of the factory?" Arundhati asked.

Yossi did a double-take. "Who told you about foamstone?"

"I had to scrounge a train for Morse. We took second place to ten cars of foamstone," she answered. "I heard a door slam. Is that Marshal Mendieta?"

Yossi peeked out. "Yeah. How do we get rid of him?"

The norm marshal reached the compartment door and pulled it open. He stepped in and sat opposite Sister Su. The door closed again, and he slumped over.

Su found him a pillow. "Darts," the bug explained. "Perfect low-mass bug weapon. He'll be sedated for a couple hours. Now you'd better find out if these car really have emergency weather-suits."

"Not yet. We don't want to set off alarms this long before we jump," Yossi said.

"What do you mean, long? Twenty more minutes, and it'll take five minutes to dress," Su responded.

"We'll dress outside," Yossi went on. "In the cold. Lord bloody haysause, talk about stupid! Randolph will never believe I did this. What a dumb tuber stunt."

"Don't trash us tubers," Arundhati said. She bent and looked out the window. Mendieta lay sprawled to her left, a small needle in his cheek. She focused away from him in embarrassment—he was totally defenseless, more naked than if he were naked in the flesh. "I don't see anything yet. Just fields and bush and black hills."

"Fournier hardly looks like anything. The LTO is pavement and a gantry and a couple buildings. The industrial igloos are west of the arcopolis, and the arcopolis bubble is almost flush with the ground." Yossi turned. "Su? You have this timed. Tell us when to start."

"The suits are overhead. I figure twenty seconds out. Wait, I'll do the countdown."

She did. After fifteen minutes she said "Now!"

Yossi and Arundhati reached up. The emergency covers opened and clattered to the floor. Wrinkled suits tumbled down, filling the space like cocoons. "I don't hear anything," Arundhati said.

"No sirens. Could we be so lucky?" Yossi tore the hood free and rolled the suit up under his arm. He banged out the compartment door, held it for Arundhati, and they hurried to the end of the coach.

The space between cars was noisy with the shrieks and bumps of deceleration. Su scuttled into the step-down, forced the door, and wound a few legs around the outside bar grip. At last they heard klaxons. "Men first," Arundhati said. Yossi looked out, then back at her. He muttered under his breath and jumped.

He tumbled, stood up in a ditch, and scrambled forward. One— two— coaches trundled by, and then no more train. Where was Arundhati?

Up ahead, Su at her side. She was hopping on one leg . . . ah, yes. Climbing into her thermals. This was still a discreet distance, so Yossi stripped and dressed in the manner dictated by some MarsBelt vice president sixteen years ago.

Back then, airsnoods were used more for air than warmth. People still thought in terms of the third intercometary. This thing was heavy with fancy gear, a luxury relic. Yossi put it on anyhow. He shuffled up the tracks, his former clothes rolled up tightly.

"Now what?" Arundhati asked.

"Any injuries?" Yossi policed the area and picked up her discarded clothes.

She raised her eyes to heaven. "Beyond counting. Where do we go?"

Yossi pointed off to the southwest. They made straight for the near bluff, and found the landscape flat once they climbed to the top. Fournier the crater rose steeply to their left, but Fournier the city was laid out like a map on edge. They hurried forward to the next feature, a cluster of tanks against a long fence.

Yossi stopped to catch his breath. "Think what snomos would say! Thousands of people, but nobody in sight. The indoor mentality."

"It's pretty late in the evening," Arundhati answered.

"Yeah. Let's scoot."

As their distance from the first tracks increased, they felt less furtive, until Su spoke: "Well, by now they know we're missing. Maybe Lester's come back from the dead to kidnap us, huh?"

"They won't think we're off to Hellas," Arundhati said.

"They aren't stupid," Yossi responded. "They'll figure your old Lester was a red herring, and draw the right conclusions. But let's hope it takes them at least sixteen hours. Let's hope they scatter their wits trying to figure out what we're up to, and lose sleep, and make a few mistakes."

"When are we going to get to those other tracks?" Arundhati asked.

"I can't call up a map on my tiepatch without interacting with some central computer," Yossi said. "Let's not risk it. We won't miss them. Let's cut west for a while."

They did, fighting gusts of wind that carried grit and sand. They took almost an hour to reach their goal. "If we're out too far the train will roll too fast for us to catch a ride," Arundhati worried. To please her they hiked inward until they came to a switch-box. It was just the size for the three to hide behind.

Yossi shook his head. "They've got spy satellites, and we've got *this*."

"Yossi?" Arundhati asked.

"Yes?"

"Why are you helping me? I didn't need to argue with you, or *anything*."

Yossi pulled down his snood. "You weren't in any shape to argue. You didn't have the energy. I had to say yes or no, and saying yes brought you back to life."

Arundhati blushed. "You're a saint."

"I'm a bird, free of my cage. That happened at Arrhenius, the night you flew from Plotwitt's Library, when for the first time in my life I saw norms really fuck up. Somebody had to pick up the pieces. What do you know? It wasn't Greta. It wasn't Marshall Mendieta. It was me!"

Yossi mustered himself. "Since then, it's been you. I'm a Green fruit fan. Pavel yearns for his unseen Red Antonia, not even a physical passion; more an idea that she's central to everything. I'm used to putting women on that pedestal. All these weeks I had your picture to moon at. You were my Antonia, but don't let that scare you. I hadn't even met you yet!"

"It scares me. My last love was like you. Bai loved me first, and I became real to him second. He made the crossing to reality. A rare man." Arundhati shrugged. "Some men won't let women become real. Romance is dangerous."

"Is that our train?" Sister Su asked. "That headlight down the track?"

"If it's got hopper cars, yes," Yossi answered. "Let's keep hunkered until the engine gets by."

They did, and then ran out. Su leapt overhead to clutch a handbar, and stretched out her legs. She hauled Yossi and Arundhati into her metal-and-hinges embrace.

They climbed up, Yossi in the lead. Balancing on the edge of the hopper, he tossed in something from his bundle of clothes. He pulled down his snood. "Smell anything?"

"What?"

"Smell! The smell!" He shouted louder. "It hasn't singed the cloth quite yet, but it might melt this blue plastic. Feel the heat!"

Arundhati climbed and stared in at the neat stacks of foamstone. "We'll have to spend the night perched like this."

"Yeah. A middle ground between one twenty above, and sixty below!" Yossi grinned. "It'll cool! This stuff is less than a day old. Its temperature vector is a big downward slope."

"I feel pretty damn obvious sitting here. Exposed as hell!" Arundhati complained.

"Let's hope nobody's looking."

They rode on, shifting, their silence increasingly grim. The landscape grew white, the air ultra-clear, except where it rippled back from the leading hoppers.

Yossi tossed in his bundle of clothes. He unrolled it with his toe. "Try slipping down. Let it toast you for a few minutes, and I'll pull you up again."

Arundhati used the rags to buffer her weather-boots. After a time they switched places. It got colder on the edge, and eventually they both decided to cook together, unzipping, shifting foot to foot, flapping their loose coats.

After a while they didn't have to do the dance anymore. Life was slightly less a nightmare.

"Yossi! Arundhati! Wake up!"

Yossi stirred at Su's summons, rising to peer over the hopper-car's high ledge. "We've stopped. Hellas!"

"We made it!" Arundhati stretched out her hands to Su, and got pulled up to where she could swing a leg over. She jumped to the ground. "Oh Lisbet, look at yourself now!"

Yossi followed. They spent a few minutes crossing the railyard's permafrost: the ground was still crunchy this early in the morning. "No fences around here," he said. "People are honest."

He was proven wrong. Holes had been augured, permafrost-posts dropped loosely, and fencewire lay on the ground in rolls. They crossed to some khod tracks.

Yossi pointed. "That's Randolph's tower. We can't go there. We *could* sleep in the Dimetown ring. The clerks are discreet about couples. But I don't dare use my card, and it costs seventy cash. I'm not carrying that much paper."

"Don't you have a house? Some kind of unit?" Su asked, fluttering out her solar wings.

"No, I sleep at the Chapterhouse, but lots of people know me there," Yossi said. "No way to keep secret. I'd just have to trust them. Damn! If only we could head straight for the *Tipsy Witch,* but she's out fishing by now."

"We can't stand here, wearing these emergency colors," Arundhati pointed out.

"Yeah. Oh hell, the Chapterhouse is right on the way. Let's give it a try. We're the good guys. God should be on our side."

"Do they serve hot food? I don't ever want to be this tired and cold and hungry again!" Arundhati said. "Not mention thirsty."

"We'll manage," Yossi promised. "And maybe we can catch up on a month of news." By this time he'd begun to grow embarrassed. What a cheap life he'd lived, on the fringes of an urban cancer that didn't even have a name!

They walked, and their trail converged with another. This was Heluj-on-Dimetown, those were greenhouses, those other things were tanks. Igloos and khods. Surely people would build more attractively after the next comets! This age could leave dreams as well as ruins. *We've only got thirty-three years, but they'll have a hundred seventy-nine*!

"You seem subdued," Arundhati said.

"I'm looking at my life through your point of view, and not seeing much," Yossi admitted.

"But we'll have stories to tell after this, won't we?" Her eyes twinkled. Yossi had never seen that before. Shock and fatigue, yes, poor woman; but never a smile.

Their route brought them uphill to Radio Ridge. They saved their energy for the climb, and saw the Chapterhouse igloo at the crest. In another ten minutes they were there. Oh nine thirty-five.

The porter fussed over Yossi's long absence. It pleased him that someone noticed, someone who called him "Captain Jardac" in front of the others. Yossi slipped him an extra-large tip. "Can you sneak these guests in until Cal gets back with my ship? and feed them some breakfast leftovers?"

"Sure, Captain. But I don't think Cal took the *Witch* out today. Tuesday's his day off."

Yossi's eyes widened. "Bloody haysause! Not by a damned sight! Not on any contract I ever signed with him! God—!" Suddenly his flush of anger became a glow of relief. "Hey, this is going to work out great! Arundhati, let's get some grub and hoof it out of here!"

The "grub" was cold and greasy and Arundhati thought it was marvelous; real food, not made from Falofino powder! They ate fast. After another fifteen minutes, the three hurried down Drumlin Avenue to the dock.

Yossi couldn't keep from running ahead. By the time Arundhati and Su caught up, he was swearing his head off, bounding from one end of the ship to the other. "I'll follow you into the pilothouse in a minute!" he called, pointing the direction.

Arundhati led the way. She stepped inside and looked around. "Let's clean in here before Yossi sees and has a heart attack," she said.

The *Tipsy Witch* became a living ship, and forty minutes later they cast off.

"Yossi? Randolph here. Is that you? It must be. Who else would your ship obey? Cal's here, and he's talking piracy, but I don't think that's true, I think it's you. This is a closed-beam call, so please tell me what the hell is going on! Hit me!"

Yossi keyed in "MAINTAIN RADIO SILENCE," and turned to Su. "Should we answer?"

"Heaven knows how they found our blip," the bug said. "Those spy satellites are getting better." She paused. "We're close to Gledhill, and your norms have only to connect you with this place and they'll draw the right conclusion about Morse being Lester."

"They've got to know already," Arundhati spoke. She came forward out of the galley, carrying a bowl of hot soup. "It's all up. The game's over. All we can do is beg."

"Yossi? Randolph Mbika calling Yossi Jardac—"

"Okay, okay! Ship, let me talk! Randolph, I'm here!" Yossi answered. "I've got something to do on Gledhill, and I'm asking you not to interfere with us. Give us twenty-four hours. Come on, let's deal!"

"Lester's there, isn't he?" Randolph said. *"We've wiggled the story out of that dime woman; Emma Schalk. Morse got erased, and Lester is happily getting on with whatever he's up to. What force can you bring to bear on him? He's got you outgunned, and I hate to add up his crimes: he'll stop at nothing."*

"What are you going to do? Invade?" Yossi shook his head. "If it were that simple, Lester would never have gotten away from Plotwitt's Library."

"He doesn't know we're onto his game: We'll arrange something. It may take a few days, though, and we want you out of there. You could blow the element of surprise. I'm sorry, Yossi. I hate to do this, but the bank

has money in that ship, and Cal's here to handle the remote steering. We're going to invoke emergency preeminence. I wouldn't do it if I didn't have to. I know how you'll feel about it. Over and out."

"What does he mean?" Su asked.

"They're going to take over the *Tipsy Witch,*" Yossi answered. He looked out the window. "They've done it already. Our engines have stopped."

"By radio?"

Yossi shrugged. "Yeah. We're a remote toy. Puppets in a toy ship, and Randolph's so goddamn *nice* about it I can't even feel properly violated! Damn his norm eyes, he's worried about our *safety*!"

"Can't we cut communication?" Arundhati asked.

Yossi pointed to a floor panel. "You know how to rewire that cybernetic mare's nest? Go ahead. I was never good at miracles."

Su pulled the panel off. "Well, it's not simple . . . . what's that?" She pointed to a crude whatnot wired out of odds and ends.

"That's something Hasday rigged to cut—" Yossi's eyes widened. "To cut the ship's radio! Bloody haysause, I forgot about it! There's a timer—"

"Just a spring. This ratchet puts pressure on it, and the spring fights it back over time. . . ." Su unscrewed two of her feet, popped on a set of needle-nose tools, and set to work. "There. Three notches up the ratchet scale. I hope that does it."

Yossi took the helm. "*Tipsy*? Talk to me, baby! Tell me you're mine!"

"All yours," the ship answered. "Are we in voice mode?" she asked hopefully. "I've always wanted to go to voice mode."

"Yes. That's a good girl, and I want top speed in toward Gledhill, just like before!"

"Why does it look like a volcano?" Arundhati asked, staring out the window.

"Or a giant power plant," Yossi said. He frowned. "Mountains sometimes trail clouds. I've seen videos of Olympus."

"Heat," Su answered. "Steam roaring up! Look at the place!"

"Look at the *water,*" Arundhati added. The *Tipsy Witch* cracked through the last big offshore slab, a low stretch of rotten yellow ice, and there was nothing beyond. Just choppy blue to the foaming base of the *alam al-mithral.*

Gledhill Island's *alam al-mithral* was pathetically shrunken, a dying ice barrier breached by countless gushing streams. Yossi scratched his head. "We'll have to take the landing boat in. *Oars,* yet! *Tipsy?* Please start sequence D."

"*D?*"

"That's what I said."

The *Tipsy Witch* winched her captain's dinghy out over the water. Yossi prepared for a new experience. The better part of an hour passed before the landing party got securely beached, their boat staked at a tilt on the edge of a small cold river. By then their leggings were soaked. A disaster, and hypothermia must follow; but it didn't. The air was too mild.

They slithered uphill like two drunks. Only Su was sure-footed. Yossi envied the bug's extra legs. Finally he and Arundhati reached naked mud, and their progress was easier.

Former paths were now open streams, but as they climbed the flows dwindled. There was no more snow to melt, just a few patches. "Somebody's changed the climate," Arundhati gasped. She stopped to catch her breath. Uphill, near the greenhouses, two lab workers gazed down on them. They looked like Earth people on holiday, clad in slacks and cream-colored smocks, no weather-wear at all. The phenomenon of visitors had them talking to each other, but neither showed any alarm.

The trio waved and puffed closer. "Hello! *Saluton! Kiel vi far—?*" Yossi was disconcerted when his friendly greeting caused the two to collapse like sudden rag dolls. "What the hell?"

Su took his arm and hurried them past. "That's the entrance igloo. If no one saw my dart attack, we can speed through. Human security won't be vigilant."

"Why not?" Arundhati asked. "And why—?"

"I take those two as evidence of what's going on. There's a *Big-Success,-Let's-Party* atmosphere around here."

The igloo's airlock was different from most. It bent to wrap the wall. They worked around to the door and clicked it open. Yossi and Arundhati felt Su push them inside. They hustled forward and waved at the ceiling camera. Halfway along, the wall hissed and the passage rippled and stretched. Time broke up into fragments; freeze shots of them reeling and choking. Then—nothing.

Arundhati woke first. Her body was wedged in the inside door. A security guard lay slumped over her desk. A lab tech sprawled on the floor nearby. "Yossi!" she whispered urgently. She tried to get up. "Yossi!"

"Uh."

"Su made it through!" She hadn't meant to whisper, but her throat wasn't working very well. She might try crawling, but then the door would shut on her companion. She wasn't sure it would open again. "Yossi! Get moving!"

He flopped forward. Together they made it into the main foyer. The place was meant to impress visitors: a showcase potted tree stood next to the fancy curved stairs.

Stairs. Stairs were good. They could lie at a tilt. That made it easier to breathe.

After a while, Arundhati thought she might stand up. "A one-bug war," Yossi muttered. "We really should have asked why Su was coming along with us."

"Fastest way here," Arundhati answered. "Your ship. No norms to veto anything."

"She can't kidnap him. Humans can't live near Su's monastery. Air's too thin," Yossi said. "I like that."

"She could copy his soul." Arundhati preferred that idea to simple murder. Was Lester still alive? She tried a tentative step. Could she reach the drinking fountain?

She did. Yossi lurched to his feet. Together they entered a long passage, using the walls for support. The hall was lined with rooms where sedated employees snored at their desks.

"It looks like Sister Su uses a longer-lasting drug than the security gas we got," Arundhati decided. "Stairs or elevator?"

"Elevator." They got two choices, 2 and B. If this were like most labs, B was where the real work got done.

They waited and rode down. Gledhill Island had contours, and though this was the basement, daylight shone through high windows along a passage whose door was wedged open by a wastebasket. Su might have left it this way, a possibility that confused Arundhati. Were they expected to make a second wave attack? Should they have taken the security guard's weapons?

She shook her head and wished she hadn't—her brains floated inside her skull. She was in no shape to attack anyone. Maybe all this wastebasket meant was that some desperately hot technicians had sabotaged their own security to increase the flow of air.

Yossi and Arundhati walked into a wall of heat. They unzipped their weather suits and stumbled on, the temperature sapping what strength they had. A voice came over the intercom. "Stop right there. I pulsed your bug friend. I hope you don't mean to take me on. You hardly look up to it."

"Lester?" Yossi asked. He ransacked his soul for the energy to keep speaking. He took a deep breath, and his heart pounded as his adrenalin cut in. "How would you like to hear about your other life? I can fill you in on the week from the second of Braho to the ninth. Arundhati knew you from the twenty-third until you sacrificed your life on Ĉerenko twenty-first."

No response. Yossi went on. "Arundhati grew to like you, Lester. She loved Bai Shan, and if he loved you that was good enough for her."

"Bai was—special," Lester said. "No man had a truer friend."

"I wasn't fond of the guy," Yossi admitted. "Maybe you two rehearsed things, and you knew you'd need a ship. I was the captain, and he tried to put the screws to me."

"Keep talking."

Yossi looked back over his shoulder. "We're no threat, and we don't want to die. Su had her own ideas. She's the bug you pulsed. We didn't know she was going to run amok."

Arundhati spoke up: "Pulsed? I hope that word doesn't mean what I think. No one should have to die anymore, not if your work is finished."

How would Lester respond to her veiled complaint? "Some of my employees may abreact to the drug in her darts," he answered. "I've got videotape to prove she fired at me, so I can plead self-defense. Human versus bug, but my weapon worked through glass, and hers didn't. It was a close thing though, the scariest second of my existence. If I didn't think life was valuable before, I'd certainly be convinced now. I regret more will die if the authorities of Mars launch a surprise attack on Gledhill."

"Not a surprise. You're on your guard," Arundhati said. "Why not call and tell them it's finished? The game is done. This door into some hot new dimension—"

Lester laughed. "Come ahead. No, please: strip first. I want to make sure you aren't carrying anything those tuber bodies weren't born with. Besides, it's too hot for weather suits."

Yossi and Arundhati stripped, not much looking at each other. They tottered forward, down a ramp, and along a new corridor.

It opened into a large space. Carpenters had removed the partition walls: modular panels lay neatly piled. The false ceiling was too low, and some of that had been removed too. Four large fans roared noisily, sucking air into outtake chimneys. The thing in the middle was a fat metal cylinder, pipes coiled around it. It curved in at the top like a bottle, with hoses leading out the top.

Lester trotted toward them from the far side of the room, wearing absurdly colorful shorts and rubber flip-flops on his feet. The hair on his scrawny chest was as white as the tufts on his head. He held a gun, and gestured with it.

"You know what they need to make fusion work?" he shouted over the noise. "A few hundred million degrees, concentrated in the middle of a vacuum bottle. If my vacuum were better it wouldn't be so hot in here. You're looking at something ten thousand times hotter than any fusion plant in the solar system! Hotter than the center of the sun!"

"I don't understand." Arundhati felt the words dragged out of her.

"There are precisely eighty-seven million, ninety-one thousand, and two hundred possible universes. I've tweaked through to eight with no results, using our dimension of time as one of the subject dimensions of space. Eight duds, cool and evolved, but *this* one is different! Exactly what do I have here, other than a speck ten to the minus twenty-seven centimeters across, smaller than any subatomic particle? The answer is: I don't know."

Lester paused. His voice dropped as they took a few steps away from the noisy center of things. "I think it's a Big Bang. I think I caused it. The heat of that explosion is spreading along three dimensions of space. One of those is identical to our dimension of time, and the rate of spread conforms to the pace of our own voyage into the future. Of course, it won't always stay so hot. Already I'm measuring a decline. In a few hundred thousand years . . ." Lester shrugged.

"You *created a universe*? Just to warm this island?" Yossi asked.

"Oh, this bottle has lots of uses! This is just the beginning. How do the physical laws of alternate universes compare to ours? Can we develop translation protocols? The reason souls live as bugs after we die, is because Lucian Fercho developed a translation protocol four Earth-centuries ago. You or I can't go through a door into another universe, but with the proper protocols, we can create correlates of ourselves. I'm not young, but I might still be alive when that happens!"

"That won't do you much good. Not if you hate God and want to escape his creation," Yossi said.

Lester grinned. "Did I pull that off? I was intent on playing up some theological lunacy. Bai put the idea in my head. Mad scientists! Blasphemy! I really dished it out, eh?"

Yossi burned red. "Damn you. I thought the reason I couldn't understand your logic was that you were far beyond me. But it was just razzle-dazzle, to jerk me around on a string—"

"I'm sorry. Technically I'm guilty of everything the other Lester did—I'm his co-conspirator and beneficiary. I won't be free much longer. If I call the authorities and surrender, I might not last the day."

The shockley nodded toward his large metal "bottle." "That's the only reason I haven't done it. I'd like to stretch this moment of triumph a bit longer. My brief day of happiness."

"And then what?" Yossi scanned the room. He lowered his voice. "Arundhati and I are probably in trouble ourselves. We've pissed off Marshall Mendieta."

"Not our fault. Su's." Arundhati pointed to the bug, who lay frozen, her legs folded in. Her voice was husky when she spoke again. "Su's our excuse. Maybe Bai should take the blame for lots of what he did. Let Yossi and me tell the story, and find out how involved you are."

"Isidis is a planetary park," Yossi said. "What you did there might upset the park service—"

"Let's begin with Morse," Arundhati interrupted. "Let's do this in chronological order. He was murdered. Wiped. That was back on the forty-ninth of Arĉimedo . . ."

A long time later, they finished. Lester put aside his gun. "You've decided my work should continue," he said. "That's why you're being so kind to me."

"Have we?" Yossi looked at Arundhati.

"We don't have any choice, do we?" she asked.

Lester nodded. "My hot particle makes all the difference. It'll take people of proficiency to keep Mars from turning into plasma. Resources, a big budget, and a staff of bright and educated people."

Lester raised his voice. "I want to explain myself with a little background. See, the norm geneticists of UNETAO decided a few years ago not to create any more shockleys; to trim funds for human science, just leave everything to the bugs. My kind were scary; geniuses too vain to keep within norm controls. Bugs were safer. So we were doomed in a few decades, but fine, I hate shockleys as much as anybody. What I love is science. *Doing* science, not just *thinking* science like the bugs do."

He paused and went on. "Now my Pandora's box is opened wide. My work is a gift *because* it's a curse: It makes it impossible for the human race to go to sleep and turn into mere larval bugs. It keeps us wetbrains on our toes. The age of science isn't over after all."

"Unless UNETAO gives Gledhill to the bugs," Yossi said.

Lester shrugged. "The bugs of Olympus will ask for it, and if they take over they'll kill me to prevent new trouble. I'm already under a secret death sentence, or Su would never have gone on a rampage. But diplomacy is slow, and we're talking about the renegotiation of major treaties. Maybe I overestimate vanity because I'm a shockley, but I think any human would hate to hand over a facility on the grounds that us wetbrains aren't up to the work. For the next few years I'll stay alive and busy."

"So all this was for the sake of science," Arundhati complained. "All Mars took a risk, like Earth took a risk five hundred year ago when they detonated the first atomic bomb, not knowing if the chain reaction would destroy the whole planet. You made yourself the master of that decision. Now you're saying the risk can't be over. You can't uncreate a universe."

Lester nodded. Arundhati turned to look at the bottle. "But damn it, everything will be under strict controls. The fun will be squeezed out, and you'll have to live with that, Director Bragolio. It'll be worse than jail. Hasday Ghazzabi will be resurrected, and a lot more norms will keep him company."

"Lester will be a prisoner!" Yossi stared at the shockley. "Won't you?"

"I've been a prisoner of places like this all my life," Lester answered. "My only freedom was with you, and that was vicarious, and short-lived. It doesn't seem real. I'd like to take the trip again. Maybe in a few years that can be allowed. I want to see Plotwitt's Library, and Happy Hollow Island. A little fantasy. But perhaps I should ask what you two want? How can I repay you for your company?"

"Make the call, Director. Do that first."

Lester nodded and went to a nearby carousel. He touched some keys. "Gledhill to . . . , uh . . ."

"Randolph Mbika," Yossi suggested.

"Randolph Mbika," he repeated. "Please patch me through to the Honorable Randolph Mbika. Director Morse—no, excuse me. *Lester* Bragolio here. Thank you. What? No, tell him I'm surrendering—put whatever verb he wants there. I'll give the right orders: my people won't make any resistance. Yes, I'll be happy to hold."

Lester set down the mouthpiece, and forced a smile. "Two hostages, a reputation as a maniac, a bomb that could melt Mars, and I've just surrendered. Please understand me. I *want* this prison you've prophesied. I want it more than anything. I've schemed to keep it, and here I am."

"And so you win," Yossi said. "Who loses? The everyday people of Mars?" He looked at Arundhati.

"Gledhill's waste heat will create a second tropics in the south fifty latitudes," Lester said. "A gift of science, like Mars itself. I may even become a hero to future pioneers. If you two want to become rich, snatch up some real estate due east of here. Forgive me, these are venal things to say, but all these factors enter into the equation that will keep me alive."

"I don't know what I want," Arundhati said. "Excuse me for thinking about myself in all this cosmic grandeur, but you've set the example, and a minute ago you asked the question. What do I want? I don't even have the certainty of jail. All this shit I've gone through—I guess I could write a book."

"I could hire you," Lester offered. "I have an opening for a G18 nanny. The courts in Fournier are busy deciding it's your job anyhow, so let's make it simple."

Arundhati looked at Yossi sadly. "All you could offer me is the sea. I'd be your sidekick on a one-crew ship."

"Aw hell, you're too skinny anyhow," Yossi answered, as his hopes came crashing down.

She stepped into his arms and kissed him, flesh to naked flesh. "But you could visit me," she whispered. "Anytime you like. It's a place to start. If you . . . I mean—"

"Want to get started?"

"Yes," she said.

"Yeah," he answered.

Days passed before the dust settled, while various PMC people crowded onto Gledhill Island. Days passed before it occurred to Yossi that there were things to be done, and victories to be consolidated. He kissed Arundhati goodbye, spicing their last hour of passion with obscure promises. Lord knew where his rowboat had gone to, but he managed to get a ride out to the *Tipsy Witch.*

He gave the ship her orders. In this warmth there was no need to thaw her out, no need for ether, no need to twiddle the feed mix. Her engines came alive and straightaway he felt the familiar joy of riding the waves. No passengers, no crowds, no vidcam jockeys, no people to charm and persuade, no marshals to apologize to—what a load off his back!

It took three hours for the joy to wear off, as it had never worn off before. He'd become a different man, addicted to the human race, and for the first time Yossi felt lonely at sea.

He'd left Arundhati for this? But it might be worse than that. It might be greed that drove him. Yossi tried not to think so, worried all the time that someone else might notice a tiny part of Arundhati's long story, and beat him to the punch. Then he'd get what he deserved, for having a ratty little mind that sniffed out chances and kept them to himself, for private exploitation.

This is me, virtues and vices packaged together. I'm a tuber. Who can be sillier than a tuber in love? And maybe it'll work! Yossi contained his impatience until the *Tipsy Witch* reached Eisenroth Dock, then stewed around the Chapterhouse all night, tossing on his bunk until the glares of his neighbors paid him back for all the times he'd glared at them.

Then he caught the train north to Fournier, and paced the corridors, wondering if any of these others were on the same mission as himself. What was the name of Lester's lawyer? Did he dare call ahead for an appointment? God yes, it was worth anything to keep from waiting another day!

Yossi heard a muffled "yes" in answer to his knock. The norm lawyer waved him into his office and pointed at his guest chair, all while focusing on some tiepatch communication only he could see. "Uh-huh. Yes. —Please sit down, I'll be with you in a moment."

"I got this form from your secretary," Yossi said. "I've filled it out." He held it forward, genuine paper.

"—No, Shabtai, it's not going to happen, and we can countersue if she keeps this up. I'll get back to you." After a few more grunts the lawyer blinked back into the real world, and took the form. "Sorry, I've got three fires burning at once. What's this? A homestead claim?" the norm asked, rubbing his chin doubtfully. "Why do you need us for this?"

Yossi felt like a man on trial. *Please justify your presence in my universe!* He suspected that this new tunic he'd bought was not exactly in style, and maybe he'd put on too much cologne to cancel the effects of nervous perspiration. Still, he was the customer, proposing to pay for services rendered. "It's nothing as glamorous as what you're doing for Lester Bragolio, and I'd like to keep out of the news. It won't take long to find out why I need you. I've paid fifty cash for this half-hour, and there's your terminal."

"Parcel 235.015-44.98? I'll check, yes indeed." Yossi stared around at the room's plush furnishings as the lawyer's fingers clicked over the keyboard. A moment later the man swiveled from his screen to face his visitor. "It's already owned. Colonel Philo S. Plotwitt—"

This was the big moment. "He doesn't exist. It's a phantom claim, because he never existed. A good lawyer can prove that. You're good, I'm told. God knows you cost enough."

"Er, but see here. It's been bought *from* Colonel Plotwitt by an Earthman named Alec St. Gall." The lawyer whistled when he read the transfer evaluation. "The man must be rich!"

"A Blue eater rich enough to fly down from Phobos on his own shuttle," Yossi answered. "Convertible wealth: he was told to buy that shuttle and sell it again, all for property that wasn't Bai's to sell. According to Europol he's embezzled millions. He'll hire a top-gun lawyer of his own, to deal with you and fight extradition back to Earth; a tuber lawyer, maybe, with a fire in his belly that norms don't have. Are you up to it?"

After a pause the lawyer nodded. "I'm the best, fire or no. It's what's up here that counts." He tapped his head. "As long as we're being so polite, can I ask about your finances? I hope you can afford me."

What is it about me? Should I have worn a business collar? A fancier tiepatch? "I can," Yossi assured him.

"Then let's see what we can do."

Late the next afternoon, Yossi caught the train to Escalante. After tea and buns he left his compartment.

Isidis was showy enough to draw his fellow passengers to the north windows and leave the communications carousel free, and he radioed ahead to his sister, looking to make sure he had privacy. "What's the situation like down there? Are those poor Blues going to get prosecuted?"

"You mean Plotwitt's?" Greta answered. "You should have seen that place empty after the bug raid. Some even came this way!"

"What about those snomos I asked you to check out? Liv Sjoberg and Tubs Najarian. How are they getting along?"

"They've got a nice igloo and their own well. It's a dandy fruit farm, biggest one in their prefecture quadrant. Randolph can't tell me how much money they've got in the bank, but he cleared his throat significantly when I guessed five digits."

"Well, how much can a snomo need?" Yossi asked. "I suppose there's no way to know if they sold Bai and Lester *all* their God-Fruit seeds. Not unless they start marketing the stuff themselves."

"If they were honest it leaves Doctor St. Gall with a monopoly," Greta said. "That's the fellow pottering around in Plotwitt's. I hope he's got a green thumb."

"Exactly what I mean to check out. A Blue fanatic stupid enough to spend his wad on a fraudulent title might seriously endanger my property," Yossi answered. "I only wish I could get there quicker. A whole week! They say we'll have airplanes on Mars in the fifth intercometary. The air will be thick enough."

"You think you're going to walk in that door, find a row of prospering God-bushes, tell Alec St. Gall to scoot, and become the richest man on Mars?" Greta asked. "As simple as that? Visit me first. I want to check your sanity. Anyhow, you might need backup. I'm told Alec's a dangerous man to cross."

"It's not the money," Yossi answered, ignoring Greta's doubts. And maybe it was true. Maybe it wasn't the money. "I mean . . . does God exist? I want to find out. After that everything else falls into place. But if I *did* become filthy rich, I could become a friend of science, and help out the crew down in Gledhill."

"You're stuck on Arundhati, aren't you?" Greta said. "I should have warned you about careerist lovers. I've got one myself. Hell, I *am* one myself. It won't be an easy romance. Don't get killed for her."

A few moments flashed through Yossi's head, moments on the night train to Hellas, moments at Gledhill. Greta would never have approved. "She's going to have that job for a while, and be happy in it," he answered. "Then she'll start thinking how special this part of her life was, when nothing was safe. Meanwhile I'll be collecting all those places; Plotwitt's Library, and Happy Hollow Island, and the *Tipsy Witch*. I'll be all over her past, matched soul to soul and memory to memory. She won't be able to avoid me!"

What could Greta say to that? After a pause, she wished her brother good luck. Yossi returned to his train compartment. The geysers of Isidis spouted and flared outside the window. Time sped on. He closed his eyes, and dreamed.

* * *

Yossi never dreamed (so he said), or else he never remembered his dreams. In this one he was accosted on this same train by a bug very like Su in appearance. Except *this* bug called himself Bai Shan, and he pulled Yossi into an empty compartment to have an oddly amiable chat.

"What?" Bai began, quirking his boxlike head. "Of course I'm a bug now! You thought I could trust that crazy Lisbet Hume to do a perfect job of missing Morse and killing Arundhati? I worried that the use of a gun would betray me—how many gun fanciers live on Mars?—but I guess not. No, I'd already duplicated my soul into her brain, so it was *me* who got freighted to the Augustinian monastery on Olympus with the next load of dead souls."

"And you escaped?" Yossi asked.

"Easily, once I earned enough points to buy this mobility sheath. The fastest route was down to the MarsBelt rail terminus in Mariner Valley. Forty kloms a day on foot, hiking into this atmosphere you wetbrains worked so hard to thicken up. So tell me, what are *you* doing here?"

As if this were just happy chit-chat, Yossi answered without hesitation. "I'm going to perfect my claim to the place you homesteaded under your Colonel Plotwitt alias. Your library, funded with money you siphoned out of Gledhill." Yossi took breath and went on to explain about Arundhati, and her loves and wants.

"So my dead self had a month of happily-ever-after with a woman *this* me has never met. My victim, almost twice! —But she's not for me anymore," Bai said wistfully. "My loves are pure now, less hormonal, no room for jealousy. I wish you good fortune. You'll be a better Colonel Plotwitt than that Alec blunderer from Earth."

"I hope he's not likeable," Yossi said. "I assumed that as a Blue—"

"He's a rich jerk, although who knows what God has done to him over the last month." Bai paused thoughtfully. "I suppose I could make sure Alec doesn't make life too difficult. Clear the way. Would that be a good bit of *zalatwic* to make up for my crimes?"

Yossi frowned. "Uh, I don't—"

"—Certainly not. You don't want a guilty conscience. That would be horrible. I'll make sure you don't remember this talk of ours, and hurry ahead. But I'd like to plant a suggestion. I want you to give me a welcome when I show up, maybe a week later. I can help you with the housekeeping. Be your caretaker while you're off at sea. Bugs cost hardly anything, and we're useful. I need a place to stay."

Already Yossi's comprehension was fading. "Uh, yeah. Nice," he said vaguely. "Sure. Like to have you. Just as long as . . . no guns . . . ."

"No guns," Bai agreed. "Not any more."

An hour later when Yossi woke up, he felt he'd forgotten something important. Something comforting, but with a worrisome edge. Something with lots of implications. Maybe it was because of these nagging feelings that he didn't sleep well that night. Or maybe it was because the nap threw off his schedule. It was hard to say.●

ON BOOKS

by
Norman Spinrad

STYLE

Queen of Angels, Greg Bear, Questar/Warner, 1991, $4.95 (pb)
Nightshade, Jack Butler, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990, $18.95 (hc)
Ambient, Jack Womack, Weidenfeld, 1987, $15.95 (hc)
Terraplane, Jack Womack, Tor, 1990, $3.95 (pb)
Heathern, Jack Womack, Tor, 1991, $16.95 (hc)

"Three stations ago the round little white autobus had filled with citizens of the shade young and old, a medieval assortment of widely different norms brothers and sisters common victims of the future . . .

Light gilded them all secondhand through the goggling windows. Five suns glowed in the slow twisting gear meshing arms of the three towers of East Comb One, generous light bequeathed to the groundlings. +No good mood this day. Roughed and not deserving."

—*Queen of Angels,*
Greg Bear

"The car's computer—a number six—awared Jimmy of internal troubles, gently chiding him if bad tidings sounded. Armor lined the car frame. A wire skirt ran beneath; no mollies could be rolled under by any seeking sport. The electroshield buzzed at button's press, frying miscreants wishing to lodge grievances. If warranted, less passive options effected. When all failed, my hands guarded; there were never safer hands than mine."

—*Ambient,*
Jack Womack

"The Starbuck series. . . . Oh yes, my lovelies, they made your Mars. You made them, and then they, your servants, your perfect angels—they made a world for you.

But then there had been trouble in heaven. . . . There had been all sorts of noise in the trivia. . . . If your local barker thought governmental paranoia would sell, then you heard that the overruns represented a sort of deliberate sabotage. . . . If the idea was that romance would generate a better market share, then maybe some naked wacko . . . would appear in 3-D in your living room to tell you that the Starbucks had been created with sex drives, and had all committed suicide in a swoon over the Marilyn Monroes.

Serves me right, you may say, for watching the zoomer channels instead of the hard news."

—*Nightshade,*
Jack Butler

Three more or less random quotes from the early set-up pages of three science fiction novels, though not from three randomly chosen novels. Each of these novels is set in a different future world — *Queen of Angels* in a twenty-first century Los Angeles, *Ambient* in a twenty-first century New York, *Nightshade* on Mars about a century later.

Each of these passages occurs early on, in the process of introducing the reader to the world and a major character.

Both *Ambient* and *Nightshade* are narrated from a single first-person viewpoint—O'Malley, a twenty-first century bodyguard in the case of the Womack, John Shade, vampire, in the case of the Butler—and it is the "voice" of these characters doing the talking in the quoted passages.

Greg Bear, on the other hand, narrates *Queen of Angels* through several third-person viewpoints, and in the quoted passage, we are meeting Richard Fettle, dilettante writer.

What these three science fiction novels have in common is also what distinguishes them from the general mode of most contemporary SF—their authors' use of style to convey character, ambiance, background detail, state of consciousness.

In a single paragraph, O'Malley not only tells us that we are in a savage urban future, that he is a bodyguard of sorts, but that far from being a standard heavy, he is a man of sardonic sophistication, possessed of a strange sort of mental elegance we have never encountered before, our guide to a new world different not only in artifact but in social and psychological texture.

John Shade reveals himself to be not your stock vampire in a Martian setting, but a creature of self-deprecating wit and intelligence in the process of introducing us to the terminology, cynicism, and hyper-capitalistic hucksterism of the futuristic Martian mediascape.

Working in third person, his prose influenced by but not entirely subsumed in the mental style of the third-person viewpoint of Richard Fettle, Greg Bear begins to lay in the physical setting of his future Los Angeles, a bit of its class structure, and the compressed futuristic state of consciousness of one of his main protagonists.

But isn't this sort of thing simply what good writing is supposed to do? Isn't good prose style supposed to reveal character, mood, and ambiance subtly and artfully in the process of describing artifact and action?

Yes and no.

Yes, when it comes to contemporary literature,

No, according to the esthetic theory on the subject long dominant within the genre of science fiction.

In contemporary literature, the action takes place either in a setting directly familiar to the reader or one with second-hand familiarity from other fiction, where key words and bits of description can orient the reader, place him in a readily understandable setting, and where, therefore, an idiosyncratic prose style primarily serves to convey the mode of a character's consciousness.

Certainly, for example, one adopts the first person narrative technique so that the story may be told directly in the voice of the character, and the only real reason for adopting this somewhat restrictive literary technique (the writer can reveal nothing of the story or the setting that the character doesn't know) is to convey the consciousness of the character first-hand, intimately, without auctorial filtration.

The reader, like the writer, is inside the character's skin, seeing through his eyes, hearing through his ears, smelling through his nose, experiencing his somatic sensations, *becoming* the character for the duration.

On the other hand, this does present certain problems. The writer, for example, may wish to portray characters with less sophistication, education, or even intelligence than he or the ideal reader possesses. He may wish to elucidate depths of character or motivation beyond his protagonists' level of self-awareness. The story may require, at various points, that the reader know more about what is going on than the characters.

One may opt for the so-called "omniscient author" technique, in which the writer simply goes ahead and tells the whole story from outside the characters in his own natural voice. Doing so makes him free to use all his knowledge and sophistication rather than restrict himself to the level of any character's consciousness, revealing whatever seems useful to the tale at any point in the narrative.

But what this strategy gains in facility, it loses in intimacy, in emotional connection between the reader and the characters, hence in narrative tension, in deep involvement. Since the reader is made all-too-aware of the voice of the omniscient author telling the tale, the story tends to exist at a psychological distance. For this reason, omniscient author technique is not employed all that often, still less often successfully.

The dominant mode of fictional narration tends to be via one or more "third person viewpoints." Here, the characters do not narrate the story directly in their own words, but the author does directly convey their internal thoughts, either through the direct reproduction of their "streams of consciousness" or via his own somewhat distanced summary description, and he will also directly describe their sensory imput and somatic sensations. But the writer will also, hopefully judiciously, step outside his characters' consciousness, knowledge, sensory streams, to describe events from an outside viewpoint.

What does all this have to do with prose style?

Well, obviously, when a writer chooses the omniscient author technique, the prose style is going to be *his* style, whether the story is set in contemporary New York, a future Mars, or pre-Columbian Mexico, unrestricted by the consciousnesses of the characters or the society in which they operate.

Just as obviously, but easier said than successfully done, when a writer opts for first person narration, the prose style must be that of the character doing the narration, using the vocabulary of his culture, informed by the style of his consciousness, restricted by his knowledge, conveying the flavor of his emotional life in its own terms, or at least creating the literary illusion of same.

Third person narration, whether through the viewpoint of one character or of several, presents a wider possible range of prose style, but also a more delicate and complex set of choices. One may restrict the influence of the characters' style of consciousness on the prose to the stream of consciousness and dialogue passages, or one may let it color everything. Or, within reason, anything in-between. One may imbed the idiosyncratic styles of several third-person viewpoint characters within a matrix of conventional prose, or for that matter, within an overview matrix of *unconventional* prose. One may throw media-montage into the mix.

What does all this have to do with science fiction?

Nothing, or so goes the theory of so-called "transparent prose."

According to this theory, the ideal prose for science fiction should be "invisible," a clear, lucid, transparent, standard style that "disappears" into the woodwork, serving simply to convey dialogue, action, physical description, emotions, thoughts, into the mind of the reader in the form of direct sensory images, producing a reading experience ideally akin to full-sensory literary cinema.

Science fiction, after all, so the argument goes, deals with the unreal, the invented, the bizarre, the outré; the necessary suspension of disbelief is difficult enough to achieve without subjecting the reader to prose that calls attention to *itself* rather than to the events and settings of the story, that therefore calls attention to the artificiality of the reading experience, that interposes itself between the reader and the sequence of images and actions, that reminds the reader that he is reading a book rather than watching a full-sensory movie inside his own head.

Well, maybe. Certainly most science fiction is written this way most of the time, masterpieces of the genre as well as rack-fillers.

But on the other hand, the medium *is* the message, a book is *not* a film, and just as there is something to be said (in Alexei Panshin's words) for "science fiction that knows it's science fiction," there is also something to be said for science fiction that knows it's literature and that prose, not imagery, is the actual medium thereof. Science fiction which, like the works of Bear, Butler, and Womack in question, far from seeking to make the prose transparent and invisible, uses it as a central extrapolative device.

Butler and Womack, whom we will get to later, have come to the SF genre from somewhat oblique directions, but Greg Bear has matured as a writer entirely within it. He has experimented with prose style before, notably in certain sections of the novel *Blood Music* and the novella "Hardfought," in both cases utilizing idiosyncratic prose styles to portray the consciousnesses and worldviews of psychically non-standard characters, mutated humans and aliens in

"Hardfought," mutated humans and a retarded girl evolving to a higher level of consciousness in *Blood Music*.

Interestingly enough, in both instances, as with *Queen of Angels*, he has done this with third person narration for the most part, rather than first. This requires a bit extra in the way of courage and audacity.

A writer using idiosyncratic prose in first person narration, after all, is, to an extent, hiding behind the character; this is not *my* style, he can say, this guy is telling his own story in his own words, so if it seems stilted, or confusing, or awkward, hey, that's not me, that's the nature of my narrator. With third person viewpoint, however, the writer is choosing the extent and manner in which the style of the character's dialogue and consciousness affects descriptions of artifact and action, and therefore cannot coyly proclaim his literary neutrality when it comes to the results.

In *Queen of Angels*, Greg Bear goes all the way and narrates the novel in a multiplexity of styles, one each for his third-person viewpoint characters, others for the mutating first-person viewpoints of two Artificial Intelligences, a certain amount of media-montage, even quoting one character's journals and his *poetry*.

Poet Emanuel Goldsmith, who we never meet as a viewpoint character, has committed the mysterious mass murder of eight of his own acolytes. A bit of his poetry:

"God shot up with me last night.
Ida shared my needle
Except he use the Empire State
  Building
Filled his veins with Con Ed"

Policewoman Mary Choy is assigned to apprehend him for therapy. Here she has examined his office:

"What she specked was unorganized uncontemporary inefficient, what one might assume of a poet; but the scatter of cubes on desktop and floor pointed to a greater disorganization, a careless personal moonstrike.

A closure.

She held up her slate to read the inprog. Sloughed cell and fiber analysis and assay of the office area showed no entry but for Goldsmith. Whatever socials he had conducted, none had entered this sanctum."

Bear, in a careful blending of Mary's consciousness, buzzwords from her world, and his own summary elucidation, introduces artifact, delineates cultural attitude, advances plot, and shows us the mind of a twenty-first century professional LA cop in action.

Queen of Angels is a murder mystery in which the question is not whodunit, but *why*. Richard Fettle, Goldsmith's surviving groupie, has personal reasons for seeking the answer. He goes to tell a literary group about the murders:

"Red haired Madame de Roche, sixty, thought people a delightful phenomenon worth cultivating. . . . She lived in the shade but she was not of the shadows . . . (she) no more resembled her guests than she did her garden or her cats, which she also cared for with grace and understanding.

+Reduce it to a performance a tale. Artificial but one way of salvaging a rough hour. That I might be a murderer. Eight die that I might live five minutes to tell a tale that happened to me to all of us for we all knew Goldsmith. Accusations of not turning him in; knowing his need for therapy which I did not; I did not. . . .

Richard shivered. +Jesus. I am a peaceful man. Forgive me, but I have earned this story."

By gliding back and forth between third-person description and Fettle's stream of consciousness, Bear sets up a minor character and the coming scene, places her in her class context, shows us Fettle's attitude towards her, portrays his own style of consciousness, so different from Mary Choy's, elucidates his motivations and his psychic relationship to the victims and Goldsmith, and establishes that in this society, murderers or potential murderers receive forced therapy rather than punishment, and that citizens thereof have the moral and legal responsibility to turn the psychically aberrant in to the authorities.

Martin Burke is a kind of therapist who enters "The Country of the Mind," the psychic landscape of his patients, in order to treat them. Here he ponders his calling, his professional failure, his estranged lover:

"Dreading being Martin Burke. Nothing enjoyable at this instant about being himself. Ozymandias in the dust. His attention switched from external to internal. He thought of Carol and the weaknesses and frictions between even stable men and women. Conflict of the sexes is not a disease; it is an unavoidable by-product like smoke and water from a fire."

Distanced third-person summary of Burke's thoughts by Bear, combined with judicious larding of stream of consciousness to portray yet another style of consciousness inhabiting the same world.

There is much, much more. Different prose styles for Burke's and Carol's viewpoint inside Goldsmith's Country of the Mind. The stream of consciousnesses of Jill, an Artificial Intelligence, prior to, in the process of, and after attaining self-awareness, as well as that of AXIS, an A.I. stellar probe undergoing a similar sentient metamorphosis.

In *Queen of Angels,* Greg Bear has taken a rather simple plot—a murder mystery that is already solved, from a formal point of view—and used it as the armature for an exceedingly complex story of character, consciousness, and psychological levels. And in the process, has portrayed many levels of a sophisticated and variegated future society from the inside out.

Science fiction, a reviewer once unfortunately and approvingly proclaimed, is "literary television," meaning that its ultima thule should be a similar effect, that the writer should seek to create the illusion of the story as a sequential montage of direct sensory images in the reader's mind rather than as a sequence of mere words.

But if anything exfoliates the full meaning of Marshall McLuhan's aphorism that the medium is the message, it is this novel. Had Greg Bear tried to write *Queen of Angels* in transparent prose that existed only to convey images, dialogue, and action, the result would at best have been a pale shadow of this considerable literary achievement.

For *Queen of Angels,* or anything like it, simply could not work as film, whether up there on an actual screen or as a full sensory movie in the reader's mind, for a story such as this can *only* exist in the medium of *prose,* and carefully crafted, multiplexed, and idiosyncratic prose at that.

Only prose can render internal stream of consciousness as it more or less occurs, only prose can truly show how a character's internal psychic landscape affects and colors perception of external reality, only prose can shade the difference between what characters say and what they think about what they are saying, and only prose *that knows it's prose,* that adapts its style to mirror the content, can do all this with emotional immediacy.

And when it comes to science fiction—where elucidation of a whole society, the natures of its inhabitants' consciousnesses, history, back story, the nature of the posited reality itself, all must be artfully slipped into the narrative flow without gagging the reader on indigestible expository lumps—to eschew the full potential of this most flexible and powerful of storytelling media in favor of a transparent prose-line that seeks to efface itself from the reader's consciousness is like shooting a whole movie without changing the lighting or adding music to the sound track.

The reading of fiction, science fiction included, *is* a literary experience, prose *is* its medium, and style at its best is also content.

Which is not to say that prose has to be as mutated as Bear's in *Queen of Angels* in order to accomplish most of the above, or that the single first person narrative form necessarily has to be more restrictive than multiple third person, or that a writer employing it must inevitably find his prose style constricted by the necessity of limiting himself to what his first-person viewpoint character is realistically capable of writing.

If said character is illiterate, uneducated, stupid, unsophisticated, or some combination thereof, filtering your prose through his consciousness is not likely to produce elegant style, though it *can* produce poignant masterpieces like *Flowers for Algernon, Davy,* or *Huckleberry Finn.*

But the writer can just as well choose a first-person narrator who is as literate, intelligent, educated, and sophisticated as he is, conceivably *more so,* at least when it comes to science fiction.

I did this twice myself in my two "Second Starfaring Age" novels, set in an evolved far future society speaking an evolved language, a society whose ordinary citizens are far more sophisticated and knowledgeable than twentieth century savants, including myself. This not only allowed me to employ as complex and sophisticated a style as I could manage, the *style itself* allowed me to create the illusion that my narrators were my mental superiors. They, after all, were thinking and speaking and being read in realtime, whereas I had recourse to thesauruses and multi-lingual dictionaries, and could take hours to craft their off-hand instant bon mots and evolved thoughts when I had to.

John Shade, the first person narrator of Jack Butler's *Nightshade,* is a vampire, and, unlike Butler, has been around for centuries before the action begins on Mars, nor has he failed to grow intellectually during his long lifetime. This legitimately allows Butler, writing as Shade, to stretch himself to the limits of his own style, perhaps, in a way, a bit beyond. Indeed, since the literary conceit is that Shade is writing the very novel the reader is holding, that Shade himself is an experienced novelist, albeit something of a hack prior to this one, Butler need not even eschew the full range of literary technique in order for his first person narrator to remain convincing.

Shade the vampire on Shade the writer:

"I began my chronicles in madness and loneliness, to have the illusion of someone to talk to. . . . It is time that has made me a novelist of my own life. All of us, as we grow older, must surely become more abstract to ourselves, more able to see and generalize the patterns of our behavior. And I am older, it may now be, than anyone. . . .

I wrote, back then, in a fever of longing. I let my prose tumble out urgent and giddy and scrambled. . . I began to read stories of human behavior, as if I could understand myself by understanding you. . . . Homer was not so respectable. We sneaked Ovid. Shakespeare had just begun . . . the revival that would transform him from groundling-pleasing scribe to classical playwright. The notion of *studying* popular literature, of actually taking it seriously, is more recent than you might think."

Shade, then, has been an *intellectual* and *literary* vampire since colonial times, and Butler is a university academic, not a typical SF writer, so Butler limits himself literarily not at all by assuming Shade's prose style, and moreover, is equipped to render it with verisimilitude.

Mars, however, far from being a grove of academe, is a kind of superheated, media-obsessed, sleazoid, wide-open, mutated frontier society, "the Free Asteroids" of SF libertarian lore, McLuhanized, leveraged, show biz-ized, and corporatized to the max, where the rebels-against-the-system plot that Shade becomes involved in hinges on a ploy to jack the price of air, involves sentient robots, janglers (humans with parts of their brains replaced by chipware), bevos (walking, talking, meat factories), and in which sufficiently high ratings for one's exploits without regard to their moral nature, that is, a high enough price for the TV rights, can protect one from the law.

All this would probably be perceived on the level of satire, farce, or yard-goods sci-fi, if Shade's witty and sardonic narrative prose-line did not render it all as surreally realistic as *Time* coverage of the Watergate hijinks or a random thirty minutes of CNN.

" 'Woop-loop-a-doop, howze-aboudy,' she (newscaster) said. '. . . Howze-aboudy John Shade howdy hustlers slammin SAM, wo yay? . . .'

While she was talking, the background switched to scenes of battle: actual takes of my house . . . this morning's satellite scan. . . . They had paid a pretty penny. But the actual cuts gave way to generated shots . . . in which drooling marines were slaughtering a camp of naked teener hustlers. . . . The action was from *Swords over Hellas* . . . and they hadn't even bothered to splice in background . . .

'They've really toned it down in the past few years,' I said to no one in particular."

Butler uses dialogue to convey in admirable depth the bizarre linguistic ambiance, the flavor and texture of his future Mars . . . .

"Ipop tight-beam? I can lase it."

"Ante plite a fake a clown needa?"

"Wann be a learna, spose a be a burna, guessem gan a jamma stone."

"Poot goot puttery, mamainmain."

While Shade, at once very much a citizen of Butler's Mars, yet at the same time possessed of an historical background and literary style that provides both an inside viewpoint and a sardonic and highly educated perspective writing for the ages, supplies translation, explication, and mordant running commentary on the proceedings. . . .

"It is precisely the sort of accommodation to black-market enterprise you might expect to find in a corporate democracy . . . whose dominant industries are entertainment and information . . . It had begun . . . back when Sam became the world's largest property owner simply by seizing the assets of major drug dealers. . . . Just a very complicated way of taxing the citizen-addict, no?"

"It's tough having to bear the fantasy life of your elders, measure up to those few bright generations from a vanished century. *A Teener Dreams of Freedom. School Days 1999*. Coming soon to a maxie near you."

". . . a few zoomers refuse to be passive modules of the net, rejecting the (for them) mandatory interface. They prefer—strange notion—to develop their own minds in their own ways. . . . if you do not want to subsist on the pap of the zoomer channels, you must resort to radical strategies. You must read books, study, think."

Like *Queen of Angels*, only more so, *Nightshade*'s plotline—*Vampire on Mars Leads Cybermutants Against Corporate Baddies*, Pictures at eleven—is merely an armature for something else, something much more, something that simply cannot be reduced to a sequence of sensory images on some boob tube in the reader's head without being utterly trivialized.

Nightshade, like Butler's Mars, like his vampire narrator, is a creature of its medium, an inherently literary experience, for that medium is prose. It is the contrast between Shade's wise-cracking and literate narration and the Dickian slapstick of Butler's Mars that gives the novel its depth and reality, and indeed it is the verbal and linguistic ambiance of that Mars which gives the setting itself such verve and life.

As Shade himself says, if you don't want to subsist on the pap of TV inside your own head, you must resort to radical strategies. You must read books *as books,* and you must be willing to be more than a passive module sucking up second-hand television, reject the mandatory interface of transparent prose, and open yourself—strange notion—to *literary* reality, to fiction, even science fiction, whose message can fully exist only in its native medium, whose medium can only be that which, in the final analysis, is what makes us human in the first place, the glorious magic of language itself.

Jack Womack, somewhat like Butler, seems to have come to science fiction along a non-genre vector, though, unlike Butler, at least for the moment, by the publication of *Heathern,* his third novel, he would seem, for better or worse, to have been adopted by the publishing apparatus thereof as one of the boys.

His first novel, *Ambient,* was published in hardcover as a mainstream book by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, a house without an SF line, received some good mainstream critical attention, but seemed to go nowhere in paperback. His second novel, *Terraplane,* was published by the same house in trade, but picked up by Tor for its SF line in paperback, perhaps as part of the deal by which Tor took over original hardcover publication of his third novel, *Heathern.*

After reading all three novels, it's not hard to read the tea-leaves too, and suss out what must have happened. A brilliant but highly idiosyncratic new novelist managed to get two science fiction novels published as mainstream by a major publisher who really didn't know what to do with them, he found himself a science fiction line which did, crossed over, and now has found himself a home for a six-book series, according to his own note in the back of *Heathern.*

Yes, *Ambient, Terraplane,* and *Heathern* are the first half of a projected six book series set in the same fictional universe, which, as we shall see, is why Womack's publishing history is relevant to a discussion of his prose.

Each of these novels is narrated in first person by a different character. The narrator of *Ambient* is O'Malley, bodyguard to Thatcher Dryden, owner and corporate tyrant of Dryco, the many-tentacled conglomerate, headquartered in a behavioral sink twenty-first century New York, dominating a kind of post-collapse, post-greenhouse United States, up to and including owning the president and the armed forces. *Terraplane* is narrated by Luther, a retired general in Dryco's semi-sub-rosa employ. *Heathern* is narrated by Joanna, Dryden's Vice President in Charge of New Projects and sometime lover.

Ambient involves a lot of corporate hugger-mugger and armed action, at the conclusion of which the ruthless Dryden emerges triumphant and O'Malley is allowed to opt out into retirement. In *Terraplane,* Luther and Jake, a Dryco hit-man, are warped back into an alternate America of the late 1930s, still in the depths of the Great Depression, and on the brink of war; after various misadventures, Luther succeeds in returning to the Dryco future. *Heathern* tells the story of a street-level messiah, Dryden's attempt to co-opt him for his own purposes, plots against Dryco, political struggles involving the Japanese, and so forth.

Once again, we are dealing with science fiction whose central appeal is literary, where the treatment for the mind-movie to be shot in transparent prose cannot convey the true nature of the work, where the medium *is* the message, and the prose style *is* the unique and fascinating texture thereof.

You can open *Ambient* or *Terraplane* virtually at random, read a short passage, and see it at once:

Ambient:

"... the Army admitted thousands . . . so that all might stalk in ease, slaughtering time, frolicking beneath the advertisement's gleam, vizzing the enormous vid monitors. . . .

On assurance of death, 1A cars passing through the Free Zone were left unscarred; Army boys, arms linked, shielded our land, to certify."

Terraplane:

"Refugees' faces held similar looks in every land I'd troubled; the look of these fit naught but for breathing and running, forced by us to abandon home and race the roads before the other team, purposeful and timeshort, landed to steal their days away."

Ambient:

" 'Wish and wing away. You could Hamlet for age over age,' she said. 'Hear me now before you pave your dark road, thripping fingers to perp and blast. My brother's soul I feel my own. Your power is mightier than your sword.' "

Terraplane:

"On streetlevel, traffic streamed: battered cars plain with years of unmuseumed use, looking less insectival as they familiarized themselves onto my mind. . . . "

This is science fictional world-building from the smallest quanta—words, grammars, speech- rhythms—on up. Unlike Bulter's literary vampire, Womack's narrators are more or less ordinary citizens of their universe, not prose stylists, and this is the texture of their speech, their thoughts, their moment-to-moment perceptions of their extrapolated environment. There is nothing at all transparent about this prose, but what it calls attention to is not so much its own stylistic elegance, though there certainly is that, but to the mutated consciousness of its speakers and thinkers. Through the medium of prose, Womack doesn't tell us this, he lets his narrators show us.

Womack's future New York is savage, exaggerated, extreme; though ably extrapolated with a wealth of detail, it is pushed so far over the edge that it would be perceived as cartoony were it to be described in conventional transparent prose, a slapstick sequence of sights and sounds on the TV screen of the mind. Nor, really, are the stories of these novels that much out of the science fictional ordinary.

But by extrapolating down to this deepest and most intimate of levels, by mutating the very vocabulary, grammar, quotidian music of his world, Womack renders it as psychologically real as our own, warps us into it on the deepest perceptual level, not that of the image, but that of the Word, the music, the very song of the self, real, or imagined.

More, far from being a degenerate patois, such as that of *A Clockwork Orange* or *Riddley Walker,* Womack's extrapolated prose-line, strangely but tellingly at variance with the surface content of his socially, economically, ecologically, and politically deteriorated America, is artfully compressed, sophisticatedly subtle, almost neoclassical in its grammatical convolutions and recondite sentence structure, an instrument of power and grace, a testament, somehow, of the spiritual transcendence of prose itself in his latter-day dystopia.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this more telling than in Luther's weirdly alien perception of 1930s New York in *Terraplane.* Here, an ordinary seedy doctor's office:

"My look shifted over time's easier-ignored flotsam: a malachite lamp in nude woman's shape, an ash wall clock, its filigreed hands pendulum driven; an ashtray where cigs might be clutched by deco penguin beaks; a typewriter of MOMA caliber. Desksided was a wastebasket hollowed from recycled elephant's foot, whose descendants passed from their veldt in my memory, leaving zoo-held stragglers to serve their species' sentence. . . . to see such items in obvious use, not hidden in owner's vast holdings, under museum glass or vizzed momentslong in sets of films, lent unforeseen awe, the shock of the old.

'He must be moneyed full,' Jake said, totaling bounty.

'All for daily use,' I said. 'Thriftshop bound. Fifty old dollars'd buy it all . . . It only lends wealth's impress.' "

Essence, somehow, of science fiction.

When we get to *Heathern,* though, the third novel in the cycle, and the first to be published from the outset in a science fiction line as a self-proclaimed sequel to the previous two and prequel to three more, it's all become a bit attenuated. Not that *Heathern* is a bad novel, far from it; as a debut it would be quite impressive. But as a follow-on to *Ambient* and *Terraplane,* it's somewhat disappointing, and bodes less than well for the final three books in the sequence.

The opening paragraph, which establishes the prose-line:

"A baby almost killed me as I

walked to work one morning. By passing beneath a bus shelter's roof at the ordained moment I lived to tell my tale. With strangers surrounding me I looked at what remained. Laughter from the heavens made us lift our eyes skyward. The baby's mother lowered her arms and leaned out her window."

Good prose to be sure, but bent back a good distance toward conventional transparency from that of *Ambient* and *Terraplane,* and Joanna's narration continues throughout the novel about at this level. What is happening to Jack Womack? Has his shift to original SF genre publication begun to infect him with the generally accepted wisdom thereof when it comes to transparency of style? Has his apparent commitment to three more novels in the series flattened his energy level with a certain pre-cog fatigue?

That is the pessimistic assessment. For a novelist with Womack's enormous potential but previous lack of fame and fortune to embark upon a six book series may indeed be a conventionally wise career move in an economic sense at this juncture, SF publishing being what it has become, but in terms of artistic development, it is a bad mistake.

Womack's greatest strength in the first two books was his prose style, a style arising out of, and admirably expressive of, the extrapolated world-view of his first-person narrators. The message creates the ideal medium for its own expression. In *Heathern,* though, there is an early warning that style is in danger of degenerating toward stylization, that Womack's style, under pressure of repetition and the genre imperative toward greater transparency, is becoming less that of the consciousness of his narrators, and more of a compromise between the idiosyncratic inventiveness arising out of content and commercial notions of "readability."

The strange rhythms are still there, but muted toward more conventional melodic expectations, the writing is still elegant, but it's all a little less, well, weird, as if Womack is making a misguided effort to use what he has learned in the writing of *Ambient* and *Terraplane* to synthesize a less outré stylistic voice, a "Womack style" that can be consistent from book to book, that preserves something of the original flavor while achieving a greater transparency that someone has convinced him, alas perhaps correctly, will enhance his sales as a commercial novelist.

The optimistic assessment is that Womack is consciously grappling with an artistic dilemma that I myself faced when I finished *Bug Jack Barron.* That novel was written in a highly idiosyncratic prose style, and indeed it was the first time that I had been truly conscious of style at all as a writer; it was a highly compressed McLuhanated style. I did much more with language than I had ever dreamed of doing before. It all seemed to come from some mysterious somewhere, and I was quite in love with it.

The dilemma was . . . *now what*?

What was I supposed to do next? Return to a conventional standard transparent prose seemed a process of sinking back to a previous level. But continuing to write in "*Bug Jack Barron* style" as was suggested to me by more than one person would have been to develop an ossified prose style, which is to say a stylization, which, however interesting and even powerful, would be unsuitable to other material.

For of course, the mysterious somewhere that the style had come from was the *content,* the necessity of conveying the consciousness of Jack Barron, media maven, ex-Baby Bolshevik, creature of the phosphor-dot interface; it was *Barron's,* not mine. To use the same prose to convey the consciousness of, say, Adolf Hitler (*The Iron Dream*) or citizens of the Second Starfaring Age (*The Void Captain's Tale, Child of Fortune*) would have been as ludicrous a mistake as using Hitler's style to render the electronic reality of Barron.

So, not without regret, I came to the somewhat sad and daunting conclusion that style, as opposed to stylization, properly arises out of content, no more so than with science fiction, and that one must therefore, alas, either develop a new one each time out, or opt for the default value of transparent prose.

It's not the singer, it's the song.

Which, I suppose, is one of the reasons, aside from commercial pressure, that so much science fiction, including much of my own, *is* written in transparent prose. It sure is easier, and it does avoid the pitfalls of telling a story in an entirely inappropriate style on the one hand, or limiting your content to what you can treat with an idiosyncratic but ossified and stylized prose line on the other.

Which is also why, however, writing one's first six novels in the same fictional universe is not exactly an ideal strategy for avoiding a slow subtle descent from mastery of an idiosyncratic style into the denatured stylization of same, nor an ideal learning experience when it comes to generalizing from a single brilliant prose-line arising out of the necessity of a single science fictional context to the development of a full palate of equally puissant multiple styles arising out of a wide range of material.

Jack Womack has certainly already demonstrated that he is capable of evolving into just such a master of stylistic multiplexity.

One can only hope that, once having fulfilled his contractual obligations, he will take the immortal words of Monty Python to heart:

"And now, for something completely different. . . . " ●

ANNOUNCMENT:

We are pleased to announce that Norman Spinrad's *Science Fiction in the Real World* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1990) has been nominated for the Hugo award for best non-fiction. Much of this book originally appeared in the pages of *IAsfm.*

—The Editors

NEXT ISSUE

It's *that* time of year again (*you* know, the season to be Jolly, etc.), and so, in keeping with long tradition, our December issue features a Christmas story—in fact, it features *two* of them. First, Hugo-and Nebula-winner **Connie Willis,** one of *IAsfm*'s most popular writers, treats us to the sly, poignant, and very funny story of a modern-style Christmas "Miracle" (this one would make a *great* movie, one of those classics they show 735 times a day on TV during the Holiday weekend—Hollywood producers take note!). Then **Cynthia Felice,** making a sprightly *IAsfm* debut, spins the wry story of how a "Second Cousin Twice Removed" drops in on a big family Christmas party and serves up some surprises that are definitely *not* on the usual Holiday bill of fare. Plus a special seasonal poem by **Robert Frazier** and **James Patrick Kelly.** *And* a recipe for Christmas cookies. What more could you possibly want?

For those of you who sit through the holidays muttering "Bah, Humbug!" under your breath, though, we turn away from seasonal concerns for the *rest* of our jam-packed December issue: Nebula-winner **Gregory Benford** takes us to an all-too-probable future for an unsettling vision of what happens to a society when it reaches "Centigrade 233"; Hugo-winner **Lawrence Watt-Evans** returns to take us exploring through some rather unusual "New Worlds," and finds that although getting there may be half the fun, the fun is only *starting* once you *do*; **Eileen Gunn,** widely known as one of the truly Weird Minds of her generation, lives up to her reputation with a story that gives us a unique perspective on the possible alternate lives of some rather well-known "Fellow Americans"; hard-science writer **Allen Steele,** in a playful mood, takes us aloft to a space station in near-Earth orbit for the macabre and blackly funny saga of "The Return of Weird Frank"; **Sharon N. Farber** paints a vivid picture of a small town whose inhabitants relive a battle of the Civil War in a bit *too* literal a fashion, in "The Coyote Recreation"; and, in a semi-sequel to his underground classic "Jesse Revenged," the gonzo **Don Webb** takes us to his own somewhat twisted version of the old Wild West, to tell the bizarre story of "Billy Hauser." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstand on October 15, 1991.

COMING SOON: big new novellas by **Howard Waldrop, Steven Utley, R. Garcia y Robertson,** and **Avram Davidson,** plus new stories by **Robert Silverberg, Connie Willis, Harry Turtledove, Mike Resnick, Maureen McHugh, Ben Bova, Thomas M. Disch, Mary Rosenblum, S.P. Somtow, Michael Bishop, Molly Gloss, Tony Daniel, Geoffrey A. Landis,** and many more.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Note that rates for the 1992 and 1993 WorldCons rise at the end of September. And don't confuse the two cons named ICon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. When calling, say why right off. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with music keyboard.

SEPTEMBER 1991

20-22—**MosCon.** For info, write: **Box 8521, Moscow ID 83843.** Or phone: **(208) 882-0364** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Moscow ID (if city omitted, same as in address) at the University Inn Best Western motel. Guests will include: author Tim Powers, and fan "Dragon."

20-22—**OutsideCon.** A gaming-oriented campout at the Montgomery Bell State Park near Dixon TN.

27-29—**ConTradiction.** Radisson Hotel, Niagara Falls NY. George Alec Effinger, Mercedes Lackey.

27-30—**AlbaCon.** Central Hotel, Glasgow, Scotland. Revival of a traditional con after some years.

OCTOBER 1991

4-6—**WeaponsCon, % Box 75, Duquesne PA 15110. (412) 466-3803.** Pittsburgh PA. SF/fantasy weapons.

4-6—**ErotiCon, 17 Guildford St., Brighton, BN1 3LA, UK.** Donnington Manor Hotel, Sevenoaks Kent UK.

4-6—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Hal Clement, Richard Pini. Media oriented.

4-6—**ConText, Box 2954, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 889-0436.** Niven, J. Tarr. Written SF (no media).

4-6—**Irish Nat'l. Con, 23 Rushbrook Ct., Templeogue Dublin 6W, Eire.** Royal Marine, Dun Laoghaire.

4-6—**MinnCon, 3136 Park Ave. S., Minneapolis MN 55407. (612) 825-8256.** Dark fantasy and horror.

11-13—**BoucherCon, 2334 Beach Ave., Venice CA 90291.** Pasadena CA. The World Mystery Convention.

11-13—**ICon, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52244. (319) 377-5929.** Coralville IA. Sixteenth annual con.

11-13—**NonCon, Box 4071, Edmonton AB T6E 4S8, Canada. (403) 463-3522.** Fourteenth annual edition.

11-13—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (512) 990-3782.** Dan Simmons, E. Bull, Amy Stout.

11-13—**ICon, Box 30004, 3995 Quadra #104, Victoria BC V8X 5E1. (604) 389-1123. Fax: 383-0112.**

11-13—**NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347.** Tampa FL. Anthony, Norton.

18-20—**MileHiCon, Box 27074, Lakewood CO 80277. (303) 985-8569.** S. Tepper, K. Walker, C. Willis.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3-7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $85 to 9/30/91.

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2-6—**ConFrancisco, Box 22097, San Francisco CA 94122. (916) 349-1670.** WorldCon. $70 to 9/30/91.

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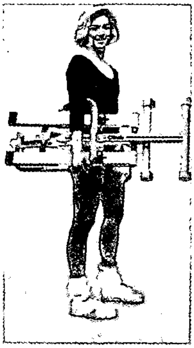

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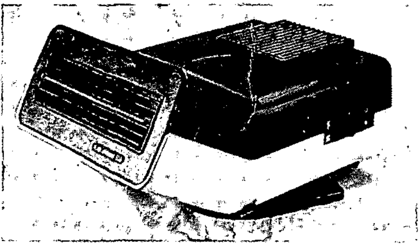

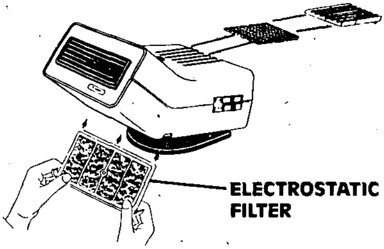

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